ON THIN ICE

by

Fred Deem

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By
Fred Deem

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ON THIN ICE

CHAPTER 1

AT THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S MEETING

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Perry Steele, whose turn it was to lead the young people's meeting, repeated this verse the second time as he looked out over the congregation of members seated before him in the auditorium of the church.

The subject for study that evening was "The Lord's Prayer." They had already read and discussed the preceding verses of this prayer, one at a time, before they came to this one in regard to being "led not into temptation."

"Has anyone some remarks or suggestions to make in regard to this verse?" the leader asked.

He waited a minute, but no one responded to his appeal. "Hasn't anyone an explanation of this verse to make?" he repeated. "Tell us what you think it means."

Still no one ventured to explain the passage in question.

"Don," the leader called out to a young man who was sitting in one of the front pews, "let's hear from you."

Perry Steele was the cashier in the Citizen's Bank. Don Rankin, the young man on whom he had called to speak, was the head clerk in the principal hardware and implement store in town. Perry and Don were two of the most highly respected young men in the town. They were clean, upright, courteous, industrious, and well behaved in every way. The two were intimate friends and inseparable companions. They were active members of the church, and live workers among the young people. They both sang in the church choir.

Don shook his head in reply to the leader's request. "The words of the verse seem to express the meaning so clearly that I don't think I can add anything to make the thought any plainer," he said.

A short distance to the left of Don, Anna Barton and Julia Jenkins were sitting. The former was the girl to whom Perry Steele was engaged to be married. She was the daughter of Judge Barton, the president of the bank in which Perry worked. Julia Jenkins was Don Rankin's sweetheart. These two girls were among the most attractive and popular girls of the community. They were good looking, well educated, charming in their manners, and interesting conversationalists. Both of them were musicians. Anna Barton was leader of the church choir, and Julia Jenkins was the organist. Both of them took an active part in young people's work.

The leader looked at these two girls. Each of them indicated by a shake of her head that she had nothing to say.

He glanced over the room from one to another to

see whether anyone present was ready to make some remarks concerning the verse which he had read. As his eye hastily swept the back part of the room he noticed James Dunn sitting in one of the back pews. Dunn was a young carpenter from Missouri, about Perry's age, who was at present working on a house which Perry was building.

Don Rankin spoke up, addressing the leader, "Tell us what you see in the verse."

When Perry was studying the lesson during the week in order to be prepared to lead in the discussion, he caught a glimpse of something in the verse that he had never seen before, and the more he studied it the more important the thought seemed to be. He hoped that some of the other members of the society would at least mention this thought, but as no one did so he saw that it remained for him to bring it out as best he could.

"A prayer," he began haltingly as he cast about in his mind for a suitable way in which to express the thought he wished to present, "presupposes, first, a sincere desire; second, a request for that desire to be granted. If it is not the expression of a heartfelt wish it is not a real prayer; it is merely an empty form."

He paused a minute and glanced at some notes which he was holding in his hand, seemingly at a loss for words to convey to his hearers what he thought he saw in the verse under consideration.

"This prayer is the expression of a sincere desire to be shielded from temptation. If the one making the prayer really means it he sincerely desires to be led in paths where the weaknesses of his nature

will not be played upon, and where environment and companionship will not give the mental suggestion of sin."

The speaker had the undivided attention of everyone present. He was speaking slowly, as if carefully choosing his words.

As he glanced over the room he noted the fact that James Dunn, the young carpenter in the back part of the house, was one of his most attentive listeners. This was the first time he had ever seen Dunn at church.

"Then if one really desires to be led in paths where temptation will not assail him," Perry went on to say, "that desire will be expressed in his actions as well as in the utterance of a prayer. He will do all he can to keep out of temptation's way; he will shy away from evil when it first comes into sight. Instead of skating out on thin ice to see how near he can come to danger without breaking in, he will keep back where the footing is solid and safe. If he should do less than this he would show that his prayer to be led not into temptation and to be delivered from evil was not the sincere expression of a heartfelt wish."

He paused a minute, then went on to finish his remarks. "We all—and I include myself in this—have the weaknesses of the flesh to fight, and it is up to us to make our own efforts and actions consistent with the wish we express when we pray, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' "

When Perry finished speaking the room was very still. He asked whether anybody had anything to

say on this verse. No one responded. As the time allotted to the study of the lesson was past he called Julia Jenkins to the organ and asked Anna Barton, the chorister, to conduct a song service. As these two girls were expecting to start in a few days on a pleasure trip to Europe, to be gone all summer, this would be the last time they would be present at any of the meetings of the young people until they returned in the fall. Hence everyone was glad to have them take as much time for the song service as they would.

After the girls had led the audience in several selections, they, together with Perry Steele and Don Rankin, sang a quartet.

Little did anyone in that audience think that this would be the last time they would ever hear those four sing together.

CHAPTER 2

THE YOUNG CARPENTER

The next evening when Perry Steele left the bank after closing hours he went to see how the carpenters were getting along with the new cottage he was having built, just as he had been doing almost every evening since work had begun on the building. He took a great interest in watching the chaotic pile of building material gradually change into a neat dwelling.

This was to be his home—his and Anna Rankin's. They were to be married in the fall as soon as Anna returned from Europe. And on the adjoining lot Don Rankin was building a house very much like the one Perry was building, in which he and Julia Jenkins were expecting to make their home. For the wedding that was to take place immediately after the return from Europe was to be a double one, and the two houses were to be ready for occupancy by that time.

Mr. Simpson, the carpenter in charge of the work, was putting in the windows. Perry stood and watched him work for a few minutes, then went around to the back porch where Simpson's assistant, James Dunn, was sawing and planing boards at a work-bench.

Perry took a seat on a pile of lumber near by and watched the young carpenter at work. He liked to

see the clean pine shavings curl up as the smoothing plane moved over the boards. He felt as tho he would like to take Dunn's place at the work-bench for a while and see whether he could do that kind of work, and whether he could make as big a pile of shavings as Dunn was making.

"Do you like carpenter work?" Perry asked.

"Yes, I like it," Dunn replied; "but I'd like it better if it didn't keep me away from home. You see I live in the country, and there isn't much building going on near by, so I have to go away from home to get a job. I don't like that."

Perry had watched James Dunn at work on this house day after day, and a number of times had stopped to exchange a few words with him. Dunn, as far as Perry had observed, seemed to be a quiet, well-behaved, industrious young man. He was rather backward about forming new acquaintances and friendships. He never spent his time after working hours loafing on the streets. Perry had never heard of his going in bad company or engaging in anything of questionable morality.

Nevertheless in all that time he had not known of the young carpenter's going to church more than once or twice. He thought that a well-behaved young man such as Dunn ought to be an active church-member. Not only so, but he felt that it was his own duty as a religious worker to do all he could to get Dunn to join the church. Several times in their short conversations he had broached the subject of religion but Dunn had not expressed himself on such matters enough to reveal the reason why he had never joined church.

A week or two before this the pastor of the church of which Perry was a member had preached a stirring sermon from the text, "Am I my brother's keeper?" in which he sought to arouse the members of his flock to make greater efforts to bring outsiders into the "ark of safety." This sermon had made a deep impression on Perry and had stimulated his determination always to be ready to do what he could to persuade those with whom he came in contact to come into the fold.

While Perry was debating in his own mind as to how to introduce the subject of religion Dunn looked at his watch and saw that it was time to quit work. Nevertheless he finished surfacing the board on which he was working. Then he put his tools in his chest and locked it. He took a seat on the work-bench facing Perry.

"I saw you at the young people's meeting last evening," Perry remarked.

"Yes, I was there. I liked some of the remarks you made. There was a lot of good sense in what you said."

"Thank you. You are not a church member, are you, James?"

"No."

"Don't you think you ought to be?"

Dunn shifted his position on the work-bench. "I can't say that I do."

"Aren't you interested in religion at all?"

"Sure I am."

"And don't you think that you ought to be a Christian?"

"Of course I do. A better one, I humbly admit,

than I am at times. But your question was in regard to church-membership, and not in regard to Christianity."

"Don't you attend church services when you are at home?"

"Oh, yes, when they have preaching at our country schoolhouse I usually go. It affords a good opportunity to meet and talk with neighbors and friends, and to go home with my girl after the services are over."

"But don't the sermons appeal to you?"

"Not very much. There isn't much to them. Besides that I know the preacher too well."

Perry was at a loss to know how to proceed. He thought perhaps it would be better to change the subject for the time being and lead up to the question of church-membership from another angle.

"Where do you live, James?"

"Over in southwest Missouri."

"In the hill country?"

"Yes, in the Ozarks. Have you ever been over there?"

"No, but I'm going over there on a camping trip in a week or two."

"I'm sorry that I'll not be at home at that time. If you'll come down there sometime after I get back home I'll be glad to do what I can to show you a good time. I know where the pleasantest camping-places and the best fishing holes are to be found."

"Thank you. I'd like to go over there sometime when you're at home."

"I'm going back this fall—to stay. And you'll find me there any time after that."

"Are you planning to quit carpenter work?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"Farm."

"Think you can make more money farming than you make at this work?"

"No, I don't suppose I'll make as much. But I'll live at home."

"Do you own a farm?"

"Yes. An eighty. Free and clear, too."

"Where is it?"

"Right in the neighborhood where I've always lived—over in the Ozarks country in southwest Missouri."

"Improved?"

"One forty is cleared and in cultivation. The other forty is in timber. No buildings as yet. But I'll have enough saved up by fall to pay for material with which to build a four-room house and a small barn."

"Ah, I see! There's a girl in the case, is there?"

"Of course. What would a home be without one?"

"No wonder you don't want to keep on working away from home."

Dunn laughed. "I knew you'd understand. This neat home you're building shows that, with you, too, there's a girl in the case."

"To be sure there is."

"I've seen you with your girl several times. She was the one who led the singing in the services last night. She seems to be one among a thousand. You're to be congratulated. With her and this fine

new home to start with there's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be happy."

"Thanks. And no doubt if I were acquainted with your girl I'd say the same thing about you."

"Yes, you would. She's positively the finest girl in the world. I'll not be able to build as fine a house as this one you're building for your home, and mine won't be modern. But we'll be as happy in our new four-room house as we'd be in a palace."

"Good. Let me propose something. After both of us are married and settled in our new homes, let's exchange visits."

"Agreed. We'll toss a coin to see which couple is to make the first visit."

"All right."

Dunn drew a silver dollar out of his pocket. "The winner is to make the first visit. Head or tail?"

"Head."

He tossed the coin. It fell with the head up.

"You win," the carpenter said. "You are to make us the first visit."

"All right. As soon as you get settled in your new home and are ready to receive company send us word and we'll go to see you."

"We'll see that you have a good time. We're going to have a pretty place. I have good shade trees and shrubbery growing already. My girl's a great lover of flowers and she expects to put out all kinds of roses and—and—phlox, and—I don't know the names of them—all kinds of flowers, you know."

"So is mine. She's an expert in raising flowers. Why, if she should cultivate a potato plant till it blossoms she'd make you think it was a rare flower."

Dunn laughed. "Yes, I know. And when my girl plants a rose it just outdoes itself in trying to bloom. You won't wonder at that when you come to know her. Well, each of us will be placed in a garden of Eden, sure enough."

"Yes," Perry agreed with him, "Paradise can be located on a town lot in Kansas or on a farm in the hills of Missouri. Let us hope that we'll have sense enough not to do anything to cause us to be driven from our Edens out into the thorns and briers of unhappiness."

"Well, Perry, you and I will never allow our Edens to be ruined by our yielding to temptation to go wrong. We have too much at stake."

"No more at stake than thousands of other couples since Adam's time, who have risked—and lost."

They arose from their seats and walked slowly homewards for their way lay in the same direction.

"When a fellow's away from home," said James, "It's hard to keep from getting a little lonesome and homesick when evening comes."

"I suppose so," Perry answered, "sometime when you're feeling lonesome drop in and spend the evening in my home."

"Thank you. I'll be glad to do so."

"Why did you hurry away from church Sunday night? I started to go back to you, intending to introduce you to some of the young people there, but you were gone before I could reach you. We try to be sociable in our church, and to give visitors a friendly greeting."

"I don't mean to show myself unsociable," Dunn

replied, "but when the audience was dismissed I simply went out."

"Weren't you interested in the services?"

"Yes, I was interested in what you said about shying away from temptation when one prays to be delivered from evil. Your remarks were sensible and practical."

"Thank you."

"Without doubt, if one follows the good advice you gave he will surely escape getting into a good many scrapes that he otherwise might get into. And," here he smiled at Perry, "if I ever hear of your going wrong, I'm going to ask you why you forgot to live up to what you taught Sunday night."

"I sincerely hope," Perry humbly remarked, "that you'll never hear of my going wrong. Dunn, don't you think you ought to enlist as a soldier in the army of the Lord?"

"Well—yes, I suppose I ought."

"Next Sunday night when the minister gives an invitation to anyone who wishes to come forward to do so, go up; will you?"

"I'll study over it."

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CHAPTER 3

ON THE EVE OF THE DEPARTURE FOR EUROPE

On the evening before the day set for the tourists to start to Europe, Anna Barton and Julia Jenkins went with Perry and Don to inspect the new cottages which were to be their homes after their return in the fall. The girls were delighted with the progress the carpenters were making. The houses would be ready for the plasterers in a few days. They inspected every room and closet, first in Perry's house, then in Don's. They suggested and discussed several changes in the plans, but finally agreed that no changes would be needed. They talked about the flowers and ornamental shrubs which they planned to set out in the yards. They felt sure that they were going to have the prettiest and happiest homes in all the town.

They took seats on the porch steps in front of Perry's unfinished house, and talked happily for a long time.

Perry leaned back lazily against a porch column and took off his hat, allowing the evening breeze to play with his hair. "Don," he said, "have you ever talked with James Dunn, the carpenter from Missouri who is working on my house?"

"Yes. You know that he worked on mine a week or more. Rather a likable young fellow."

"Yes, he is. I had a long talk with him the other day. I found out that there's a romantic love story in his life, just as there is in yours and mine; and he is happily dreaming and planning to have a home of his own before long, just as you and I are doing."

"Where does he live?"

"In the hill country of southwestern Missouri. He is engaged to a girl down there. He is planning to build a house this fall, and they are going to get married."

"I wish them happiness and success," Anna Barton said.

"He and I made an agreement," Perry went on to say. "I promised him that after he and his wife get settled in their new home and we get settled in ours we'll drive over there and make them a visit; and he is to bring his wife up here and make us a visit."

"Why, Perry!" Anna reproved him, and yet she laughed. "Well, if that isn't just like a man! You don't know anything about the girl; you've never even seen her. How do you know that they'll be the kind of people with whom we'll want to exchange visits?"

"Well, he seems to be the right kind, and I suppose the girl that would suit him would be all right, too. Besides that, she is a leader in the young people's work down there."

"Well, Perry, if she ratifies the agreement, and sends us an invitation, I'm willing. But I don't believe we'll ever hear anything more about it."

"Oh, yes we will. Wait and see."

"James was at the meeting the other evening," Don remarked.

"Yes. He told me that he liked what I said about the verse, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' "

"Is he a church-member?"

"No. And yet he seems to be somewhat interested in religion. I'm going to get him to join church."

They fell to talking about the trip to Europe. The four had been reading together about the various places that would be visited, and they took a delight in talking about the wonderful trip. The girls had agreed to write regularly and to tell about the objects of interest they saw, so that it would seem to Perry and Don as if they were seeing the sights with them. On the other hand the boys agreed to keep Anna and Julia informed about all the news and gossip and society affairs of the home town. Moreover when the young men should take their three weeks' vacation and go on the camping trip in the Ozarks country, as they were planning to do soon, they were to write the girls a complete account of all that happened.

When the dusk began to come on they arose from their seats on the porch steps and slowly walked homeward. All four stopped at Barton's and sat on the rustic benches under the shade trees on the lawn, and talked for a while. By and by Julia and Don went on, leaving Perry to talk with Anna a while longer.

A silence came over the latter couple after the others had departed. It was several minutes before

Perry quietly remarked, "Anna, sweetheart, you have no idea how much I'll miss you this summer."

Her hand gently stole into his as she half whispered, "I'd feel bad if I thought you wouldn't miss me."

"This summer will seem long to me," he sighed. "But it will be wonderful to think how glad we'll be when you return and we get into our new home."

"Won't that be fine! But, Perry, the summer won't be so long to you after all. Look what a fine time you'll have when you and Don go camping."

"Oh, we'll have a good time, of course. But think how much better time we'll have when we go out camping next summer with our wives."

"That will be more fun than going to Europe."

Perry and Anna never had quarreled. In this they were unlike Don and Julia, who had little disagreements frequently, and on several occasions had had serious quarrels which threatened to end their courtship.

"I expect to have a good time this summer," Anna said, "but I'm sure the home coming will be the most enjoyable part of the trip. We'll surely be happy in our new home."

"It will be our Eden."

She considered this a minute. "Yes, it will be," she agreed with him, "and we must remember what it was that destroyed the first Eden, and what has been destroying Edens ever since."

He locked his arm in hers. "Yes, I know; but we're not going to let the tempter get into our Eden, sweetheart."

"Perhaps we can't help his getting in, but we can

refuse to follow his suggestions. What I mean is that we have human nature with its weaknesses, and we can't prevent thoughts from coming into our minds occasionally that would be very wrong for us to act upon. But we can refuse to yield to such thoughts."

"Sure! We'll turn and run if the devil comes in sight or hearing. Safety first, you know."

CHAPTER 4

IN THE COUNTRY SCHOOLHOUSE

On Sunday James Dunn hired an auto from the man with whom he was boarding and drove to his home in southern Missouri. He started early in the morning and arrived at the home place in time to eat dinner at noon with the home folks. In the afternoon he went over to see his fiancee, Gertie Green, who lived about two miles away.

He found her lying in the hammock under the shade trees in the yard, reading a magazine. She looked up when she heard the auto stop at the front gate. As soon as she saw who it was that had come she threw aside the magazine and ran joyfully to meet him.

"O James!" she cried, "I've been wishing all day that you'd come! I'm so glad to see you!"

"Not as glad as I am to see you, sweetheart," he answered. "My, you're looking prettier than ever."

"Glad you think so," she returned as she led the way to the hammock. "You're looking well, too."

They sat in the hammock. "What's the news?" he asked. "What have you been doing, and what's going on in the neighborhood?"

She told him about seeing and talking with different neighbors, and about a social gathering at Norton's a few days before, at which nearly all of the young people of the neighborhood had been

present. He wanted to hear about each and everyone of them, for they were all his old friends and neighbors, and he had been homesick to see them all the while he had been working over in Kansas.

She had recently walked over to the eighty acre farm which James owned, and had looked over the site where he and she together had planned to build the house in which they were to live after they were married. She had been studying some flower catalogs, and when she was looking over the ground she planned what kinds of ornamental shrubbery and flowers it would be best to put out and how these plants should be arranged around the buildings and over the lawn. She told him all about what she had planned, and together they talked and planned, just as they had done a dozen times before, as happy as could be. They were very much in love with each other, and they looked ahead with a great deal of pleasure to the time when they would get married and occupy the home which James was planning to build.

By and by he noticed her magazine and asked her to read aloud. She complied with the request and read a story.

What a happy afternoon they passed! And what joy there was in the thought that such wonderful happiness as this was soon to be theirs, not merely for an afternoon or evening now and then, but for all the time.

She finished reading the story and tossed the magazine aside.

"It seems mighty good to be with you, sweetheart." His voice was vibrant with tenderness as

he spoke. "How I wished while I was away that I could run in and spend an evening with you now and then."

"It seems good to me to have you with me, dear," she assured him. "I've missed your companionship just as much as you've missed mine. Sometimes I have taken walks by myself, and tried to imagine that you were with me—just as you were when you went walking with me the afternoon before you went away to work."

"That was the time we walked over to the eighty?"

"Yes."

"When we were talking a while ago about how we are going to beautify our home with flowers and grass and trees I was reminded of a remark that was made to me by the young man whose house I have been working on. He said that an Eden can be located on a town lot in Kansas or on a farm in the hills of Missouri."

"He must be planning to get married, too."

"He is. And he has as fine a girl as the sun ever shone on—excepting my girl, of course."

"And he—is he worthy of such a girl?"

"Yes, he is a splendid young man. Everybody likes him. I— I invited him to bring his bride down to make us a visit as soon as we are ready to receive company."

She looked at him in surprize. "And are they coming?"

"Yes, provided you join me in the invitation."

"I'll do that, of course, if you wish me to."

While they were talking two neighbor girls, Mary

Norton and Nellie Howard, came. Miss Green arose from her seat on the hammock to greet them as they turned in at the gate.

"Hello, Nell and Mary! Glad to see you. Come and have a seat." She pointed to some vacant lawn-chairs by the hammock.

The newcomers returned the greeting cordially and shook hands with James.

"Why, James," Miss Norton exclaimed, "we didn't know that you were in this part of the country."

"Just came over today," he explained. "Have to go back tomorrow."

Miss Howard's face colored slightly as she shook hands with him. In the days when they went to district school together she and James had been sweethearts. That was before Greens had moved into the neighborhood.

"We are on our way to the young people's meeting," Miss Howard said as she took a seat. "We started early so as to have time to stop in here a few minutes. It is such a fine day that we decided to walk rather than to go to the trouble of hitching up the horse to the buggy."

"I'm glad you came early," Gertie said. "We'll all go to the meeting together—that is, if James wants to go."

"Sure, I'll go. 'Twill give me a chance to meet our friends and neighbors."

They conversed agreeably until it was time for the meeting, then they all got into James's auto and he took them to the district schoolhouse where the society met.

There was a good turnout at the meeting. Miss Green, as president of the society, presided. After the opening songs had been sung and the scripture lesson had been read the president announced that the lesson study would be the next thing in order, and she called Mary Norton, whose turn it was to act as leader in the lesson discussion, to come forward and take charge.

"On last Sunday afternoon," Miss Norton began as she stood before the audience, "our lesson was a study of the Lord's Prayer. As we had time to discuss only a part of that prayer we decided to take that same subject again for our lesson today, beginning where we left off last Sunday instead of taking the lesson outlined in our quarterly. Hence we will begin with the verse, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' Will anyone volunteer to explain this verse?"

After a short pause the leader called first one member and then another to talk. Each one made a few remarks, telling what he or she saw in the verse. James Dunn listened attentively to see whether anyone would try to bring out the thought that he had heard Perry Steele bring out in the meeting he had attended the Sunday before. But, while different ones quoted other verses touching on temptation and made remarks about praying for deliverance from evil, yet no one seemed to have thought of the fact that this prayer is the utterance of a heartfelt wish that will express itself in the shunning of temptation and shying away from opportunity to go wrong on the part of the one making the prayer.

But James did not offer to say a word or to speak of what he had heard the Sunday before in regard to this verse. He never had taken part in these meetings altho he usually attended when he was at home.

The leader seemed to see something more in the verse than was being brought out in the discussion, and at last, seeing that the others were not going to mention the thought she had in mind, she spoke of it herself.

"Did you notice the first word in this verse?" she asked. "The word is 'lead.' It suggests being led by the Spirit. You know there are a good many promises of being led by the Spirit, and a good many instances in the Bible in which people were so led. This prayer implies a belief that God is ready to direct our steps. The Bible says that God doesn't tempt any man, but that each one is tempted when he is drawn aside by his own lusts. Then if we go into temptation it isn't God that leads us there. But God *can* lead us in ways where temptation will *not* assail us, and where we will be delivered from evil. This prayer expresses a longing to be thus led in the right way; a longing to be led away from that which would excite unholy desire."

The speaker paused a minute. Everyone present was listening attentively.

"Well, when you make that prayer, how do you look for it to be answered? In what way do you expect that the 'leading' for which you are praying will come—that 'leading' which will conduct you not into temptation, and bring you into the way of

deliverance from evil—provided you follow that leading?"

She looked around over the audience and waited a minute for someone to volunteer an answer to the question, but no one spoke.

"By the still small voice," she went on to say. "By being given the impression that it would not be safe nor right to go in the way of temptation or danger; by a sense of right and wrong. Then, when you have a knowledge or impression as to what is right or wrong, or as to what would be safe, or as to what would be proper and fitting, you have the 'leading' you are praying for, and it is up to you to follow that leading, and to do what you know to be the right and safe thing to do, and to shy away from what you already know would suggest wrong-doing. No use to pray for a leading unless you are ready to follow that leading. If you know the ice is thin you already have your leading not to skate out on it. This is a wonderful prayer to make, a big prayer, and it is up to us after we have made that prayer to follow the leadings of the Spirit of God and the inner promptings of right and wrong and to keep on in safety."

Miss Norton took her seat, and the president again took charge. Several songs were sung by the congregation, and in closing all joined in repeating the Lord's Prayer.

CHAPTER 5

THE SCHOOL-TEACHER

The next Monday morning after the girls went away Perry and Don packed their camping outfit in Perry's auto, ready for their outing. This outfit included a tent and two cots, some blankets, cooking utensils, and some books and magazines, and a reading-lamp.

They drove over into the Ozarks country in south Missouri. They found a good camping-place in the woods by the side of a clear spring, close to a creek where they could fish. Here they pitched their tent, built a camp-fire, and cooked their evening meal. They laughed and shouted and sang as they went about their work, and were as happy as could be.

After supper they stretched out comfortably on their cots and talked a long time—talked until they were too sleepy to talk any longer.

The next morning Don sat by the camp-fire and read aloud a chapter from the New Testament while Perry kept his eye on the bacon and eggs which he was frying, as he listened to the reading.

My, the breakfast tasted good!

It was a fine morning. The birds were singing joyfully in the trees. The air was cool and refreshing. The sky was clear and blue. The boys whistled and sang and joked with each other as they got out

their fishing tackle and went over to the banks of the creek to fish.

But the fish did not bite well that morning. After the noon-day meal they found a pool of water up the creek a short distance that looked more promising, and they tried fishing there a while. Now and then one or the other of them would get a "nibble," and his cork would bob a little, but it just wouldn't go under. They sat there patiently holding their fishing-poles for two hours or more without catching a fish.

Suddenly Don jabbed the end of his pole into the bank, leaving the line and hook dangling in the water. He went back onto the higher ground and threw himself down on the grass. Perry soon joined him.

They lay there on their backs, gazing upwards into the clear blue sky. It was so peaceful and quiet all about them that the few sounds that reached their ears, such as the whispering of the leaves in the leafy tree-tops, and the twittering of a small bird among the branches, seemed but to deepen the drowsy silence that hung over everything. The boys enjoyed the restful stilness.

By and by Perry sleepily remarked, "A penny for your thoughts, Don."

"I was just at this minute thinking about the remarks you made at our young people's meeting."

"About being led not into temptation?"

"Ye—ah. Living up to that verse would keep a fellow out of a whole lot of trouble, wouldn't it?"

"Uhm—hh," assented Perry. "However, I suppose we'll not have to be on our guard while

we're camping out here all by ourselves in this lonesome hill country."

"Better not be too sure of that, old boy. We've got our human nature with us, even in this out of the way camping place. Just as you said at the young people's meeting, we don't dare to trust ourselves too far."

"Of course."

"Well, let's go to camp and read a while," Don proposed.

"All right. That suits me. Or, rather, let's drive out a few miles over the country roads."

"I'd rather stay in camp and read some of the books we brought with us. You can go driving, if you wish."

Perry decided to do this. He backed the auto out into the country road and drove leisurely along that little used highway for a mile or two. He passed a little schoolhouse at the cross-roads. A little farther down the road he overtook the teacher walking homeward from school. He stopped his car and invited her to ride.

"Thank you," she replied. "I only go a short distance."

"You are welcome to ride as far as you go," he insisted as he held open the door for her to get in.

She climbed in and took a seat by his side.

"I suppose you are the one who is teaching in the schoolhouse back at the cross-roads?" he remarked as he started the car.

"Yes. I'm teaching there," she replied. Her voice was well modulated, and she pronounced her

words with pleasing distinctness. She was a neat, attractive looking girl.

"Your school is lasting late in the season, isn't it?"

"Yes, a month later than usual. We had to close school a month during the winter on account of an epidemic of measles; so I have to teach a month later to make up the time."

"Do you like to teach?"

"Yes, I like the work. And yet now and then something comes up in connection with it that is not altogether pleasant."

"I never taught school, so I don't know whether it would be pleasant work or not. But I do think it would be fine to live in a picturesque country like this, instead of being shut up in a brick business building all day."

"You work in an office?"

"In a bank."

She pointed to a gate a short distance ahead. "There is where I live."

He stopped the car at the place indicated, and got out and held the door open for her.

"Do you allow visitors at your school?" he asked.

"Why—yes—it is generally understood that the public schools are open for public inspection."

"That isn't what I mean. I am taking my vacation and am camped back there on the creek. But I am finding it rather lonesome. The fish are not biting well, and I find myself longing for someone to talk to. It would be a pleasure to me to visit your school a while tomorrow."

"I fear my little school would be rather dull and uninteresting to you."

"The teacher would not!"

"We've never been introduced," she reminded him as she turned to go into the house.

"Will you allow me to introduce myself to you?"

She hesitated.

"If you will permit me—my name is Perry Steele. I am cashier in the bank in my home town, am single, have a good reputation and standing in the best society, and am an active church-member."

"You recommend yourself very highly, Mr. Steele," she returned with mock gravity. "My name is Gertie Green. I'm a country school-teacher, as you already know. I'm single, and I, too, am an active church-member. I bid you good afternoon, Mr. Steele."

So saying she walked into the house.

CHAPTER 6

THE "STRAWBERRY GIRL"

In the meantime Don was sitting on the ground at the base of a tree, leaning back against the trunk, reading a book. He became so deeply interested in the story that he did not see nor hear a man approaching until he was startled by hearing someone call out cheerfully, "Hello, there! Camping out, are you?"

Looking up from his book he saw a middle-aged man standing a few feet away.

"Yes, we're camping here," Don returned.

"I was just passing through the timber on my way home," the man explained, "and I saw you here. Alone, are you?"

"No. A friend is camping with me. He drove out to see the country a while ago. Hasn't got back yet. Do you live close by?"

"Yes, less than a half mile away, if you go straight across the country. A mile and a half if you go around by the road. Norton is my name. Tom Norton."

"Rankin is mine," Don said as he arose to his feet, "Don Rankin."

Norton grasped Don's extended hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Rankin. From Kansas?"

"Yes. Southeast corner."

"Good State. I used to live over there myself. Are you going to stay around here long?"

"Our vacation is to last a month. I don't know whether we'll stay right here all that time or not."

"Well, I live right over there," pointing to the west. "As soon as you get over that knoll you can see my house. If you get lonesome drop in and have a chat with us. If we can do anything for you let us know."

"Can you tell us whether there is any place near where we can get eggs and milk?"

"Sure I can. We have eggs and milk to take to market every day. Just come over. We can let you have milk fresh every morning and evening. And, by the way, we have plenty of strawberries now—fine ones, too."

"Strawberries! Good. Have you any to spare us?"

"I rather guess we have! We sell several crates every day. Come over and get some right now, if you want them."

"We'll have strawberries for supper!" Don was ready to start right away. Norton led the way through the timber. When they crossed the knoll which he had pointed out they came to a cleared field, and the house was in plain sight across the field. It was a one-story building, unpainted, and in only fair repair. The barn and outbuildings were in better condition. There were some fine big shade trees and some well kept flower-beds in the yard.

A short distance to one side was the garden, enclosed with a woven-wire, chicken-tight fence. In this enclosure a girl was picking strawberries.

When they came to the door of the house Norton invited Don to come in.

"Thank you, I'll just wait out here," Don answered. "If you can sell me a dozen eggs and a bottle of milk, and two boxes of strawberries, I'll be happy."

"All right."

Norton peeped through the screen into the kitchen. "Mandy," he called out.

A woman appeared and opened the screen door.

"My wife, Mr. Rankin," Norton said by way of introduction.

Mrs. Norton acknowledged the introduction.

"Mr. Rankin is camping back there on the creek," Norton explained to his wife, "and he wants to get a dozen eggs and a quart of milk. He wants two boxes of strawberries, too."

"We have the eggs, but you know we haven't milked yet this evening," Mrs. Norton said. "Mary is picking some berries for supper, and she can soon pick two extra boxes for you."

"I'll pick the berries myself," Don volunteered, "if you'll allow me. I'd enjoy doing it."

"And I'll milk while you're getting the berries," Norton said. "So you can take a bottle of fresh milk back to camp with you."

The farmer gave Don two empty berry boxes and conducted him to the strawberry patch in the garden, where his daughter was filling some boxes with the fruit. He introduced Don to her.

"Mr. Rankin wants two boxes of berries," he explained, "and he volunteered to pick them himself. Now, Mr. Rankin, there are the berries; go to

it." So saying, Mr. Norton turned and went back to the house.

Don fell to work picking the fine big red berries. From time to time he cast a furtive glance at the girl who was at work only a few yards away.

"These certainly are fine berries," he ventured to observe.

"Yes, they are," she agreed with him.

"What variety are they?"

"Aroma."

After working away for another minute in silence he asked, "Do they grow many berries in this country?"

"Yes. The Fruit Growers' Association ship out a good many."

Two or three times Don asked questions for the purpose of engaging her in conversation, but her answers, tho courteously given, were little more than a "yes" or "no."

Presently she stood up. Her boxes were full, and she was ready to start for the house. He glanced at her. She was a good-looking girl. She had on a wide rim straw hat, and her bobbed hair showed in natural disordered curls under the rim.

"My partner and I are camped over yonder on the creek," he volunteered the information in order to keep up a conversation and hold her until he could get his boxes filled.

"By the spring?" she asked.

"Yes. You know the place?"

"Yes."

By and by his boxes were filled. He arose and walked with her to the house.

She remarked as they were going through the garden gate, "One of the merchants with whom we trade, Mr. Cantrell, used to live up in your part of the country. Did you know him?"

"Cantrell? Well, I should say I did. He used to be a member of the same church that Perry Steele and I belong to. Perry is my camping partner, you know."

Mr. Norton had not yet brought in the milk, so Mary invited Don to come into the house and take a seat while waiting for the milk.

Don found himself in a clean, plainly furnished room. There was a piano in it. Mary pointed to a rocking chair, and, excusing herself, went out into the kitchen. Before long Mr. Norton came in with the milk and eggs. Don paid for his stuff and went his way.

"Any time you want anything more," Norton called out as the caller was departing, "Come over. You can get fresh milk and eggs every day. Berries too."

Don thanked him and started on.

"And say," Norton called out, "if you get lonesome in your camp, you might bring your partner over and spend the evening with us sometime."

When Don arrived at the camp he found Perry building a fire preparatory to getting supper.

"Well, for the land sake!" Perry exclaimed when he saw the provisions Don was bringing in. "Where in the world did you get all those eatables? And those berries! Yum, yum! They look good!"

"At a farm house a short distance over yonder.

We can get milk and eggs and berries there every day, if we want to."

"Good! Who says we're not having a good time?"

They had a feast that evening, and they were hungry enough to enjoy it thoroughly. As they were eating Don remarked, "If Anna and Julia could be here to enjoy this feast with us, wouldn't it be fine?"

"Yes. It would beat any spread they can get in their New York hotel."

"Say, Perry, there's a good-looking girl at Norton's—the place where I got the berries."

"Is there? Get acquainted with her, did you?"

"Her father gave me an introduction to her, but she was inclined to be rather distant. Polite enough, you understand—that is, with the politeness that is due a stranger; but not friendly and unreserved as one would be with an acquaintance. Where did you go when you were out driving today?"

"Several miles east on the country road."

"See any pretty country?"

"Yes. The fields and groves and homes make the view along the road rather picturesque."

"Did you meet or talk with anybody?"

"I had a passenger for a short distance. A party who was walking in the same direction in which I was driving."

"Have an interesting chat with him?"

"Had an interesting chat all right, but this wasn't a 'him'."

"Ah! A girl?"

"Yes. School-teacher."

"That's interesting. Good-looking?"

"Very. Pleasing conversationalist, too."

"Well! You'll have something of special interest to write to Anna, won't you? Didn't learn her name, did you?"

"Oh, yes. We introduced ourselves to each other."

Don laughed. "Very proper. Of course you wouldn't think of striking up a flirtation — beg pardon, I mean acquaintance—without a proper introduction and a letter of recommendation, even if each one had to write the letter for himself! Do you know whether she has a good looking sister to whom I could recommend myself very highly and strike up an acquaintance?"

"No, I don't know. I might inquire the next time I see her."

Don looked up quickly. "Hm—m! So there's to be a next time, is there? Date already made, eh? Well, well! And back home they think you are rather slow!"

Perry felt annoyed at the teasing manner in which Don was speaking, but he made no reply, and the matter was dropped.

The next morning each of the boys wrote a long letter to his sweetheart. But while Perry, in his letter, told all about the camp and the surrounding scenery, he did not say anything about meeting the pretty school-teacher or about his intention to visit the school that afternoon.

Don, however, in a joking way wrote to Julia that Perry was becoming very attentive to a pretty schoolma'am who lived not far from their camp. He went on to say that while Perry had driven out in his

auto to take the schoolma'am home, he himself had dutifully gone to a neighboring farm house and obtained some berries for supper. However, he wasn't complaining about this at all, for really he enjoyed picking the berries. He wouldn't have complained if it had taken twice as long to fill the boxes. He never before had any idea how much fun it was to pick berries. He probably would go to that patch every evening and pick berries for supper. Incidentally, he might say in passing, the farmer from whom he got the fruit had a pretty daughter — a very pretty daughter — and this daughter helped pick the berries. You see that made the work lighter; in fact, very much lighter.

Don took the letters to the rural delivery box in front of Norton's house where the mail carrier would pick them up. But he did not see anything of Mary Norton as he passed the house.

The boys found a place down the creek where the fishing was better, and they put in an enjoyable forenoon. Nevertheless, as Perry sat on the bank watching his cork, he found himself thinking of the pretty school-teacher and looking forward to his visit with her at the schoolhouse that afternoon. He planned to get there for the last hour of the session so he would be on hand when school was out. Then he would take her home in his auto.

He had no intention whatever to be disloyal to Anna Barton. Certainly not. He loved Anna with his whole heart, and the thought of being untrue to her never entered his mind. Just a little social pastime, a little entertaining conversation—that was all he was seeking.

CHAPTER 7

ANOTHER DATE

When Perry presented himself at the schoolhouse that afternoon, Miss Green invited him in and showed him a seat not far from her desk. She tried to be somewhat formal and to keep from letting him see that she would have been disappointed if he had not come, but the heightened color in her face, as well as the welcome that she could not keep from showing in her eyes, revealed the fact that she was glad he had come.

She went on with the recitations and finished the day's work the same as tho he had not been present. When school was dismissed and the pupils had all filed out Perry did not make any move towards getting up from his chair, and she dropped into her seat at the desk near by. They talked about the school lessons, and from that the conversation drifted to a discussion of some recently published books which both of them had read. A pleasant half hour passed in this way before Miss Green made the remark that it was time for her to be going home. He told her that he had come in his auto and would be pleased to take her home. She accepted the invitation.

If they had kept as well within the bounds of propriety during the rest of the time of Perry's vacation as they did during the half hour's pleasant chat in

the schoolhouse that afternoon they could have spent an hour together now and then in pleasant conversation to their mutual enjoyment and benefit and the two weeks following might have stood out in their memories in the years to come as one of the happy periods of their lives.

When they came to her home Perry drove right on without stopping or turning in.

"You are going past my home, Mr. Steele," she quietly reminded him. She did not seem to be at all disturbed on account of being carried by.

"Just prolonging our drive a little. We'll turn back at the next cross-roads; or, if you'll permit it, we'll drive around the section."

They went around the section. Even then the drive seemed too short.

As they were nearing her home he slowed down the car. "Will you go driving with me tomorrow evening?" he asked.

"Aren't we getting along rather swiftly on such short acquaintance?" she asked. "We never saw each other before yesterday, you know."

"Well, Miss Green, you see my vacation lasts such a short time that if we are to enjoy each other's companionship at all we have to move swiftly. We can't wait a week between visits, you see. Now, look here, Miss Green, our meeting and being sociable with each other is making the time pass more pleasantly for me. Isn't it doing the same for you, too?"

"Well, suppose I admit that, what then?"

"Why not have an enjoyable time tomorrow evening?"

"Mr. Steele, I don't want you to think that I'm the kind of girl to encourage a stranger to pay his addresses to me."

"I don't think that, Miss Green. Neither do I want you to think that I am in the habit of striking up an acquaintance with strange girls, for I'm not. But—well, this is different."

"We're each trying to make ourselves think so. But really, is it safe for anyone to disregard the proprieties and conventions of society?"

"No, it isn't, as a rule," he admitted. "In this case, however, it's different, because you are different. And, Miss Green, I have a good enough opinion of myself to think that you will be safe."

"If I were to follow my own inclinations," she said as he stopped the auto at her gate, "I wouldn't hesitate about accepting your invitation to go driving with you tomorrow evening. And in the meantime I'd look ahead to the date with just as much pleasure as you would. But it wouldn't be best for us to be wholly indifferent to the fact that people will talk, would it? I have a good name and reputation; I take it for granted you have, too. But if people see that I go out joy-riding time after time with a stranger who happens to be camping near where I'm teaching my good name and reputation would suffer, would it not? So would yours. The pleasure we would get from going with each other the few days you will be here would be more than counterbalanced by the unpleasantness our indiscretion would bring upon us. The fun would cost too much; would it not?"

Perry was thoughtfully silent for a minute. "You

are right, Miss Green. I beg pardon for trying to persuade you to go."

"I felt sure that you would understand, Mr. Steele."

"If we had had a mutual friend to introduce me to your folks, so that I could go right to your home to see you, and invite you, right in the presence of your family, to go driving, there would be no gossip."

"Unfortunately our acquaintance didn't begin that way."

"Well, I hope I'll have a chance to see you again before I go away from this locality."

They had been sitting in the auto where he had stopped it in front of her home. He helped her out and raised his hat as she bade him good-day. After she had taken a step toward the gate she turned and said shyly, without raising her eyes from the ground, "While I won't go driving with you tomorrow evening, if you should happen to be driving past the schoolhouse just about the time school is out—not sooner than day after tomorrow—and if you should happen to be coming in this direction, there wouldn't be any harm in your inviting me to ride."

"None whatever," he assured her. "I wouldn't be at all surprized if I should happen to be passing the schoolhouse day after tomorrow."

"But I wish to be honest with you, Mr. Steele. You must understand that I have no thought of anything more serious than just a little innocent sociability, you know. For I have a sweetheart—I'm engaged to be married to him—and I expect to be true to him. He is away from home at present."

"Fine, Miss Green, fine! That's exactly what I meant, too. For I, too, am engaged to be married—engaged to the finest girl ever — and I have no thought whatever of flirting or love-making or anything more than mere good comradeship for the few days I'll be camping here."

CHAPTER 8

AT NORTONS'

When Perry returned to camp Don was frying fish. He was whistling and singing as he looked after the skillet. When he saw Perry drive into camp he called out cheerfully, "Hello, there! Just in time."

"So I see. My, it looks cheerful here! Doesn't that fish smell good? I'm as hungry as a bear."

"So am I. I'm as hungry as two bears. Say, we're having a jolly time, aren't we? We'll enjoy our fish more than Anna and Julia will enjoy their evening meal in a fashionable hotel in New York."

"Yes, and while we are lounging around the camp this evening, talking and reading, and lying on our cots outside the tent and looking up through the tree-tops at the peaceful stars until we get so sleepy that we just can't hold our eyes open a minute longer—we'll be having as good a time as the girls will have going to an opera in the city."

"Better. And we'll feel a whole lot better in the morning, too."

While they were eating Don turned to his companion with the question, "Where did you drive this afternoon?"

"A few miles eastward."

"See the pretty school-ma'am?"

"Yes"

"Took her home from school again?"

"Yes."

"Hm-m! Make another date with her?"

"Well," challenged Perry, "what if I did?"

Don helped himself to another fish, and began to pick out the bones. Presently he asked, "Perry, do you think she is the right kind of girl?"

Perry bridled instantly, "Yes, I do!"

"Would the right kind of girl take up so readily with a man that she knows absolutely nothing about?"

"She is not taking up with me as much as you think, Don."

They finished in silence. After the dishes had been washed Don threw himself across his cot while Perry took a seat on a camp-stool and leaned back against a tree.

"I had a visitor this afternoon while you were away from camp," Don said.

"Did you? Who was it?"

"Mr. Norton. He just dropped in to talk a few minutes as he was passing by."

"Did he bring any news from the strawberry girl?"

"You mean his daughter? No, he didn't mention her. But he invited us to take supper at his house tomorrow evening."

"He did?"

"Yes. And I told him we would be delighted to go."

"That's fine. We'll have strawberry shortcake and genuine cream for supper!"

"And a jolly, good, sociable time after supper."

There was something in connection with that invitation of Mr. Norton's that the boys knew nothing about. Mr. Norton had made an investigation as to their worthiness before inviting them to his home.

It came about in this way. After breakfast that morning Mary followed her father out of the house. "Daddy," she said when she saw that they were safely alone, "will you do me a favor?"

"Sure, I will if I can," was the hearty answer.

"Not so loud," she cautioned. "Are you going to town this morning?"

"Yes, I have a load of produce to take to market."

"Will you see Mr. Cantrell?"

"I'll make it a point to see him if you wish me to."

"Well, I do." She hesitated. "I—ah—well, I—"

"Out with it, honey. You can trust your old dad."

"I know I can, Daddy. Well, Mr. Rankin said that he and his friend Mr. Steele used to be well acquainted with Mr. Cantrell. I'd like for you to ask him what kind of young men they are and whether they are straight, clean fellows."

He looked at her closely. "Why do you wish to know that, lass?"

"Oh, because. If they should be coming here for eggs and milk it would be best for us to know whether they are the kind of young men we would want to be neighborly with."

He placed his hand affectionately on her shoulder and smiled at her. "I see. We're a bit particular about whom we sell our eggs and berries to. I'll do what you ask, lassie. I'm glad that you have confidence in your Daddy to trust him to make that

kind of an investigation for you. And if Cantrell's report is favorable, what then?"

"Oh, nothing. We'd know better how to act if they should come around here now and then—to get berries, you know. And maybe—maybe—you know people away from home appreciate genuine south-Missouri hospitality, and—and—"

"Yes, I see. You think it would be showing hospitality for us to invite them to take supper and spend the evening with us."

"You understand," Mary laughed. "But, say, don't let on to anybody that I suggested this."

"Of course not."

When Mr. Norton returned home after his trip to town Mary saw him coming and ran out to open the gate to let him drive in.

"Did you find out, Daddy?" she asked as he stopped his horses and got out of the wagon.

"Yes. It's all right, lassie. Cantrell says that they are two of the finest young men in the country. Steele is cashier in the State bank, and Rankin is head clerk in a hardware store. There isn't a stain on the record of either one of them."

"Good. And how about the invitation to come over tomorrow evening?"

"Tomorrow evening, is it? What does your mother say about it?"

"I haven't said anything to her about it. I want you to fix it up with her. You see I'm not supposed to be interested in this matter at all. You're the one who wants them to come, you know, because you want to be neighborly."

Norton laughed. "All right. I'll mention it to

her right away. And I'll just happen to be passing the camp of the boys this afternoon and will just happen to stop and pass the time o' day, and as I'm leaving I'll invite them to come over tomorrow evening."

"Daddy, you're a dear," Mary said as she turned and went into the house.

The next evening Perry and Don shaved and exchanged their outing costume for the neat Palm-Beach suits which they had brought with them in their suit cases, and went over to Nortons.

They were treated to an excellent supper: chicken, fried just right; peas and new potatoes fresh from the garden; good home-made bread, and good country butter; and strawberry shortcake and cream. The guests enjoyed the feast.

After supper Mr. Norton took the boys around and showed them the orchard, and garden, and live stock, while Mrs. Norton and Mary washed the dishes. When the men returned to the house they all found seats in the living-room and conversed on topics of general interest. Mary sat down at the piano and played and sang a song. She found out that the boys both sang, so she hunted through her music and found some selections that they knew, and played the accompaniment while they sang. Then she played some familiar church hymns, and they all, including Mr. and Mrs. Norton, sang together. Mr. Norton was jolly and talkative; Mrs. Norton was rather quiet, but she kept up her part of the conversation; Mary did not have much to say, but she was an excellent listener. Her eyes were bright and sparkling; her cheeks were flushed; her

pretty bobbed hair was a charming disarray of natural curls; and her smile was radiant and bewitching.

When the boys arose to depart Don turned to Mary, saying, "Miss Norton, if I come by with the auto some day while we are camping here, will you go driving with me?"

"With pleasure," she returned.

CHAPTER 9

YIELDING A LITTLE

Promptly at four o'clock the next afternoon Perry drove up to the schoolhouse. In a few minutes the teacher came out. It seemed to him that she looked more charming than ever as she got into the auto with him. They chatted about a dozen different things as they drove homeward. Again, as on the evening before, Perry drove past her home instead of stopping at the gate.

She laid her hand on his arm. "Mr. Steele, you've driven past my stopping-place again."

"Will you not consent to our going for a short drive?"

"You seem to be going on whether I consent or not."

He stopped the car. "No, Miss Green," he said as he looked into her pretty eyes, "I'll turn back right now if you say that you really wish me to do so."

She dropped her eyes before his ardent gaze, but said never a word.

He started the car and drove slowly on, "Which way shall we go?" he asked as they came to the cross-roads.

She pointed to the north. "There's a magnificent view from a hill out that way—a view that is worth going miles to see."

Perry took the road leading in the direction she had pointed out. They fell to talking about a book he had been reading while resting in camp that afternoon. She had read the book a short time before, and her comments and criticisms were interesting. When they came to the hill of which she had spoken he stopped the auto. The view that spread out before them was indeed magnificent. It was a view of fields and groves, of hills and vales, of timbered creek bottoms and close clipped pastures and meadows.

For a long time they sat there enjoying the fine view, pointing out one picturesque spot after another, and talking about the places thus viewed, and about other views of which this one reminded them. Time passed, but still they sat there and talked. Perry's hand lay on the back of the seat. While she was pointing out a house in the far distance he leaned closer to her in order to see better at what her fingers were pointing, and his arm slipped along the back of the seat behind her, and, as they conversed about different things, it gradually encircled her waist.

She sat up straight. "Aren't you forgetting yourself, Mr. Steele?" she asked with dignity.

"Possibly I am," he half-apologized as he moved his arm to the seat-back. "Such attractiveness is enough to make one forget everything else."

She leaned back in the seat, and they began to converse about other things. Once more Perry allowed his arm to creep closer and closer to her until it was again encircling her waist.

"You're forgetting yourself again, aren't you?"

she reminded him. But this time she did not lean forward away from his arm.

"What's the harm?" he asked. "No one will ever know."

"Does that make this way of doing any the less improper?"

He did not answer the question, but changed the subject of conversation. As they talked about various things, he very gradually drew her closer and closer to his side. She did not seem to notice this, nor did she seem to be conscious of the fact that before long her head was lying on his shoulder.

It was growing dark, but nothing was said about its being time to go home. Perry tightened his right arm around her waist, and with the other hand he picked her hand up from her lap where it was lying, and, raising it, he dextrously pushed it behind his shoulder. She submissively slipped her hand farther along behind him until her arm was around his neck.

He bent over her. "Gertie," he whispered, "look up."

Slowly she lifted her face from his shoulder, and raised her lips to receive his kiss.

"Perry," she whispered in his ear as her face nestled closer against his shoulder, "we are not true to our sweethearts, are we?"

"They will never know about this," he whispered back, kissing her again.

"I feel—as—if—we were playing with fire," she whispered.

He made no reply for a minute. Then he conceded, "I suppose it would be better for us to drive homewards."

He released her from his arms and took the steering wheel in his hands. Neither of them were very talkative on the way home. He helped her out at the gate, and held her hand a minute as he asked, "Will you go driving with me tomorrow night?"

"Don't you think it would be better for us not to go?"

"Just once more, Gertie."

She hesitated a minute before replying, "I'd like to go with you once more, but we—we ought not to."

"Just once more," he pleaded.

"It would have been easier to say no before we had gone together the second time. If we go once more it may be harder still."

"Well?"

"Doesn't that of itself show that we are venturing out where the ice is thin?"

"Oh, we're not going to venture out on thin ice—any farther, at least. You know I'll be going away in a few days and we'll not have a chance to see each other after that, so all will be well. Let's go just once more."

"Well, once more, then."

CHAPTER 10

THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

When Perry came back to camp he found Don sitting by the reading lamp with an open magazine in his lap. Evidently he had been trying to read, but the story had failed to hold his attention and he was absently gazing at the glowing embers of the camp-fire a short distance away.

"Have you been to supper yet?" Perry asked.

"No. I've been waiting for you. I brought in some fresh milk and eggs, and some good home-made light bread, and some strawberries while you were away."

"From Nortons', I suppose?"

"Yes. There's a letter on your cot for you."

"A letter?"

"Yes. You know I ordered our mail brought out by the carrier to Mr. Nortons' box. These letters were brought out today, and I got them when I went after the berries. I received one from Julia, too. You can read while I fry the eggs."

Perry fetched his letter to the light and sat down on a camp-stool to read it. It was from Anna Barton, and had been written in St. Louis. The girls had stopped two days in that city. They had spent the days in sight-seeing, and they had gone to the theater each night. This letter was written after they had returned from the theater the second night.

It contained a brief description of some of the sights they had seen, and of the play to which they had gone that night. In conclusion Anna assured Perry that she had thought of him a hundred times during the day and she imagined that she could see him and Don sitting on the bank of the creek, each holding a fishing pole and waiting patiently for his cork to go under. She just knew it would be lonesome for them away off there in the woods, where they were not acquainted with anybody. If there were only some acquaintances to see and talk to now and then, it would make the time pass more pleasantly. She did hope they would have a good time on their vacation.

Perry slowly folded up the letter and put it back in the envelop.

"Supper's ready," Don called out. "Anything of special interest in the letter?"

"No. Anna wrote about what they saw and did while they were in St. Louis. I suppose Julia wrote the same thing to you."

"Yes, she did." Don cut a slice of bread, and helped himself to a fried egg. "The girls both seem to be very much worried," here he began to chuckle, "for fear that we'll be terribly lonesome away off from everybody, and not a soul that we were ever acquainted with near us—no one to talk to at all. You didn't feel very lonesome while we were at Nortons' last evening, did you?"

"No."

"And my guess is that you were not very lonesome while you were out driving this evening. Am I right?"

"I wasn't very lonesome."

Don laughed. "Did you see the teacher this evening?"

"Yes."

"Take her home from school again?"

"Ye-es."

"Went joy-riding a while before you let her out at the gate?"

"Of course."

"Stop to shake hands and chat with her folks when you took her home?"

"Pass the berries," Perry said, ignoring this question. Don knew very well that Perry had never met Miss Green's folks nor stopped at her home.

"Ahem! Make another date with her, to go out joy-riding?"

"Well, what if I did?"

"You're stepping on the gas, old boy. Three auto rides in four days, and a perfect stranger to begin with, and another date made ahead!"

"This is mighty good bread," Perry observed. He wanted to change the subject.

"Yes. Mary Norton made it."

"Hm-m! Did she help you pick the strawberries?"

"No—o, she was busy with the house work, and I had to pick the berries by myself."

"Hard luck! Didn't you get a chance to talk with her at all?"

"Oh, yes. I went in the house a few minutes. Besides, she came out and showed me her flower beds. She is quite a successful florist."

"Didn't she give you a chance to talk with her alone?"

"I didn't seek for a chance to talk with her alone. Why should I? Neither you nor I have any business to say anything to a girl that we would hesitate to say before her friends. We're not contemplating proposing marriage, you know."

Perry made no reply to this thrust.

After they had washed the dishes and moved their camp-stools close to the lamp to read, Don remarked, "I asked Nortons about your schoolma'am."

"Did you? What did they say?"

"They said that she is a splendid girl. She has always lived an exemplary life, and she has the respect of everybody who knows her."

"Good. I felt sure of that."

"It would be very unfortunate if tongues should be set wagging against her on account of our coming into the neighborhood."

"Why do you say that, Don?"

"Why do you suppose?"

Perry sat staring at his book a long time after that, but he had no idea what was on the printed pages before him.

That night, a long time after Don had gone to his cot in the tent and was sound asleep, Perry lay wide awake in the hammock, staring up through the leafy tree-tops into the starry sky. If Don thought he had been going at a pretty fast gait to go driving three times with a girl to whom he had never been properly introduced and whom he had never seen until four or five days ago, what would he think if he knew what else took place!

And what would Gertie Green's friends think?

He felt sure that she was a girl who was worthy to be treated with the respect and chivalry due from a true knight to a lady—a lady with whom one would not think of presuming to take liberties or to become unduly familiar; why had he not encouraged her to expect—aye, exact—such treatment from a young man?

When he tried to offer his bed-time prayer Perry could not put away the thought that he had fallen short of behaving as a real gentleman and Christian. He could not help feeling somewhat condemned for persuading an upright, well-behaved young woman to step down from the high position where she belonged, and where he as a gentleman and Christian should have encouraged her to remain, and to submit to being treated as cheap and commonplace.

He knew well enough that if Anna Barton should meet with some nice-appearing, smooth-spoken stranger while on her pleasure trip he would consider it highly improper for her to allow herself to be persuaded into engaging in a petting party with that stranger. And he knew well enough that if Gertie Green's school pupils, or the members of her Sunday-school class should find out how he and she had behaved themselves during that joy-ride this evening they would be shocked and scandalized, and her school would probably be ruined. The thought was not an agreeable one, that he, an active worker in the church, had coaxed her to do what would cause her so much trouble if it should be found out.

Moreover, suppose that the members of the young

people's society to whom he had made that talk about praying to be led not into temptation—just suppose that they had come upon him when that car was parked on that picturesque hill! They would most certainly have told him to learn to put into practise some of his good advice before he made any more talks to the society!

And Anna Barton—suppose that she should find out about it! She would give him his walking papers in short order. In fact he had placed himself in a position where all kinds of trouble would be stirred up unless what he had done should be kept hidden.

He couldn't help seeing that he hadn't lived up to what he honestly believed to be honorable and right. He knew that his self-respect and his respect for Gertie Green would have been greater if they both had behaved themselves properly.

To be sure he hadn't committed any great sin; he hadn't actually "gone wrong"; and, as far as that is concerned, he didn't for one minute contemplate any such thing as going wrong. Of course, not. But —he had disregarded the rules of propriety and the conventionalities of society. Hm-m, what does one mean by saying that? He remembered that one of his teachers in the high-school, in an address in chapel one morning declared that the rules of propriety and the conventionalities of society are the safeguards which society, through generation after generation of bitter experiences, has learned to be necessary for our safety. They are the restraints which hold us back from danger; restraints which we disregard at our peril. They are not arbitrary decrees which society has elected to make; they are

disclosures of the conclusions to which people by long observation and hard experience have been forced to come. They are the "Stop, Look, and Listen" signs at dangerous crossings. Perry remembered that this teacher gave as an example the fact that society has decreed that one ought not to pay one's attentions to, or to receive attentions from, a stranger of the opposite sex, until someone who knows that stranger well enough to vouch for his worthiness introduces him. And it has decreed that a young couple ought not to go riding by themselves, especially after night, or to act "soft" or "spoony" when they are together. Society has made such decrees because the wreck and ruin of thousands have compelled it to see that such rules are necessary for safety.

Oh, well, that was all true, of course, as a general thing; but he and Miss Green were not going to venture beyond the danger-line. She wasn't the kind of girl to go wrong; and he knew that he wasn't the kind of young man to do so. Not by a long shot!

No harm would come of it, anyhow, he assured himself. He had made an engagement to go driving with the girl again. There wouldn't be anything wrong about that, if it would only stop with their taking a drive and behaving in a manner becoming to a gentleman and lady. They could have a delightful time without disregarding the proprieties, or doing anything which they would be ashamed to have published to the world. He made up his mind—almost—that he would behave during the drive the next evening as if Don and Julia were sit-

ting on the back seat of the auto, observing all that was going on.

But—ahem—in his secret heart he knew that since he had found out the pretty teacher would permit him to put his arms around her, he was not at all likely to resist the temptation to do so when opportunity presented itself, as it undoubtedly would tomorrow evening.

And, honest now, did he wish to resist that temptation? If he did, he could easily have that wish gratified by not going on that drive the next evening. But he hadn't the slightest intention of failing to keep that appointment. She was such a charming girl that he looked forward to that drive with a good deal of pleasure. Why, he wouldn't miss it for anything! And down deep in his heart he knew that, resolution or no resolution, he wouldn't be as careful about keeping to his own side of the seat as he would be if a chaperon were along. And, really, he was glad that there would be no chaperon. It was only for the one time anyhow, so what if he didn't quite live up to his convictions this once?

Well, it was time for him to dismiss the subject from his mind and go to sleep. Again he tried to offer a bed-time prayer. For some reason it wasn't easy to do this tonight; it seemed to be a mechanical effort rather than the expression of a heart-felt wish, as he asked to be cared for and protected during the night, and guided and directed in all that he should do on the morrow. Right there he stuck. Did he truly believe that he would be thus guided? And, really, did he wish to be directed in what to do and what to avoid doing on the mor-

row? For instance, in the matter of taking that drive with the school-ma'am? In fact, since he had made an engagement to go, and he fully intended to keep that engagement, wasn't it a little late to ask for guidance in this matter? And really, while the prayer that he formulated was for guidance, the real wish in his heart was for the Lord to confirm the decision he had already made. Of course he didn't expect to be guided by an audible voice, but rather by the still small voice within—by the sense of what would be right and expedient. The thought came to him that even if he didn't ask for guidance as to whether to go driving he might at least ask to be guided by the Spirit in what he should say and do while on the drive. Hm-m, that might interfere with the fun! If he should ask to be thus directed, well—he already had a clear sense of what would be right and proper, as clear as if he had heard a "thus saith the Lord." And he knew in his secret heart that if he should follow this guidance while out on the drive the next evening he and the school-teacher would behave in a manner becoming to a lady and gentleman, and not let their pleasure drive turn into a petting party, as it had this evening.

Moreover, the thought came to him that a sincere prayer for guidance certainly carried with it a promise to do whatever he might be shown to be the best thing to do. And Perry couldn't quite bring himself to make any such vow as that; not on this particular pleasure drive, at least. After it was over, he'd get back into line again, and follow the prompt-

ings of the still small voice, and the leading of the Spirit.

Oh, well, he had no thought of carrying this little flirtation to the danger point, so it didn't matter much anyhow. He would not even carry it to the point of falling in love with the school-teacher. Of course not, for he was already engaged to a girl whom he wouldn't trade for all the girls in the whole Ozarks country.

He remembered the story of the man who missed a train because he didn't hear the alarm clock. The reason why he failed to hear it was because he hadn't heeded its call on numerous occasions when it didn't make much difference whether he heeded it or not. Perry tried to put away the thought that in not heeding the voice of the Spirit he might be putting himself in a condition in which he would not be able to hear when it did sound a warning. To go driving or not to go driving, or even to pet or not to pet, these were not very grave questions; but to ignore the promptings of the Spirit in the little things of today, that might be a very serious thing if it should make him deaf to the leadings in the big things of tomorrow. It might cause him to lose his faith.

But—well, he'd dismiss the subject for tonight and go to sleep. But as he closed his eyes, he thought of the prayer,

"Lead—us—not—into—temptation!"

CHAPTER 11

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

As the result of his restlessness during the forepart of the night Perry slept the next morning until Don called him to breakfast. Then he dressed and washed, ready for the morning meal, but when he sat down to eat he had no appetite.

"What's the matter with you this morning, old boy?" Don asked.

"Nothing. I don't happen to be hungry."

He helped wash the dishes, then he lay down in the hammock. Presently he asked, "Don, when are you and Mary Norton going to take the drive that you spoke to her about the other evening?"

"Tomorrow, Sunday."

"Afternoon or night?"

"Afternoon, of course. I'm engaged to one girl; I haven't any business to take another girl out joyriding by herself after night."

"Humph!" Perry winced.

A minute later Don went on to explain: "They have Sunday-school at the district schoolhouse at two thirty. Miss Norton leads the singing, and has to be there, so that's where we're going to drive. Why do you ask? Have you made another engagement to go driving with the auto?"

It was a minute before Perry answered, "Yes."

"Well, let's go together, then. Miss Green teaches

a class in the Sunday-school. We'll all four go together. That will be better than for each couple to go separately. People will be less apt to make remarks about the girls than they would if each one of us should go driving with one of them by herself. You know the girls will keep on living in this community after we go on, and they can't afford to be talked about."

"All right. That will suit me. And to be honest with you, I know it will look better for us to go to a public meeting together than it would to go driving in couples."

Don strolled off up the creek, while Perry took a good refreshing sleep in the hammock. That afternoon they drove into town together and procured some new magazines. They drove around over the country a while, and did not get back into camp until nearly dark.

The next afternoon the boys were ready to start more than an hour before the time for the Sunday-school to meet. They drove first to Nortons' for Mary. Then they went to Greens'. Gertie and her mother were sitting in rocking-chairs under a big tree in the front yard. Perry got out and went through the gate. It was the first time he had ever set foot in the yard. Gertie's face was suffused with pink as she greeted the newcomer and introduced him to her mother. The latter made a few remarks about the weather as her daughter hurried into the house and put on her hat. In a few minutes Gertie was ready, and she got into the auto on the front seat with Perry, and they drove to the schoolhouse.

The house was fairly well filled. Miss Norton led

the singing, and Miss Green taught a class of young girls. At the invitation of the teacher of the young men's class Perry and Don went into that class and took part in the discussion of the lesson.

After the services were over the girls introduced the boys to a number of their friends and neighbors.

When they drove back to Nortons', Mary invited the other three to stop a while. They accepted the invitation and brought chairs out under the shade-trees in the yard. Mary was as lively and jolly as could be. Her eyes danced and sparkled with fun and good humor as she took part in the conversation. Gertie Green was rather quiet, altho she, too, was agreeably entertaining. The boys laughed and told stories.

Don told about a funny incident that happened when he and Perry were seniors in the high school, the time when they went with the glee-club and chorus to the musical festival at Pittsburg.

"When was that?" Mary asked as soon as he had finished the story. She was leaning forward in her chair, her eyes and countenance showing keen interest.

"Five years ago this spring."

"Were you one of the singers in that contest?"

"Yes, Perry and I both were in it. We sang with the boys' glee-club from our school, and with the mixed chorus, also."

"Well, of all things! Did you win any prizes?"

"Our mixed chorus took second prize. The glee-club didn't get placed at all."

"Well, I was in that contest."

"You were!"

"Yes. I was attending the high school in Joplin, and was a member of the girls' glee-club and the mixed chorus. And, if you remember, the Joplin chorus took first prize that year."

"Well, what do you know about that! And you really were there? We were introduced to quite a number of the contestants from other schools, but I don't remember having met you."

"I don't remember seeing either of you boys, but I do remember meeting one of the soprano girls who was with the chorus from your school. She and I ate dinner at the same table in the cafeteria. Her name was Barton."

"What? Anna Barton?"

"Yes."

"Well, I do say!" Then Don turned to Perry with the question, "Do you happen to know Miss Barton, Perry?"

"Why, yes. She is the daughter of the owner of the bank in which I work."

Don laughed. "So she is."

Gertie Green, who had been listening with marked interest to this conversation about the musical contest, now spoke. "I was at that musical festival," she said, "and I heard the glee-clubs and choruses sing in the contests."

"Well, I declare! Were you one of the singers in that contest?"

"No. I was a student in the teacher's college at Pittsburg at that time, and I sang with the Messiah chorus Friday night. Your glee-club contest took place on Friday in the day-time, if you remember. But among such a large number of contestants of

course I don't remember either of you boys. I remember seeing Mary there because I already knew her."

"We stayed over to hear the Messiah that night," Perry said. "And to think that you were in that chorus!"

"Now that each of us has found out that the other three are musicians, let's have a song," Don proposed.

This met the approval of the others, and they went into the house to the piano and sang a number of selections.

By and by Perry took Gertie home in the auto. Don lingered to pick some fresh berries to take back to camp with him. Mary helped him pick them.

She chatted away as happily as could be while they were gathering the fruit. Her rosy cheeks, flushed with health and happiness, her curly bobbed hair, slightly disarranged by the evening breeze, her lovely eyes sparkling with fun and mischief, her charming smile, and her bright, witty remarks and observations, all combined to make her fairly bewitching. Don watched her with growing wonder and admiration; and—altho he was loath to admit it, even to himself—something stirred within him that was deeper and more abiding than mere admiration.

He thought of Julia Rankin, and he knew that it was time for him to be going, and that he must avoid seeing Mary Norton any more. He realized that even now it was late for him to awaken to that fact.

As he was about to leave Mary innocently held

her hand out to him. As he took her hand in his she looked at him and smiled. He looked into her eyes a minute, startled by what he saw revealed in them. There suddenly swept over him an almost overwhelming desire to take her in his arms. The touch of her hand thrilled him. He dared not look into her eyes—he could not do so without being overmastered by the desire to throw his arms around her and tell her that he was madly in love with her; yet he could not look away. She must have caught an inkling of the conflict that had so suddenly begun to rage within him, for her eyes sobered, she gazed at him gravely and half afraid for a minute, then she withdrew her hand.

He turned and hurried away.

When Perry stopped the car in front of Greens' and was helping Gertie out, he said to her, "Let's go driving once more."

She looked into his eyes a minute. "It wouldn't be best, Perry."

"Once more."

Still she hesitated.

"Tomorrow evening after school?"

"Well, you may bring me home from school tomorrow evening. But please, oh, please, don't ask me again."

CHAPTER 12

DON RESOLVES TO FORGET

That night Don got out his pencil and tablet and began a letter to Julia. He wasn't in a writing mood, and he didn't know of anything that he wished to tell her, but he owed it to her to write, and he forced himself to do it.

He began by writing that he and Perry were well and were enjoying their outing. They went to Sunday-school that afternoon, and it was a very good Sunday-school, too. The pretty teacher that he had mentioned in his other letter—the one that Perry took home from school, you remember—she was at Sunday-school. She teaches a class there. And the girl who had helped pick the strawberries —he had mentioned her in his other letter if he remembered aright—well, she was at Sunday-school, too. In fact, these two girls rode with him and Perry to and from Sunday-school. They all stopped at Mr. Norton's (the home of the strawberry girl) on their way back, and had a pleasant little visit. These people were proving to be very good neighbors indeed, and it was very handy and pleasant to be able to get milk and eggs and berries fresh every evening. And it was such a short distance to go for them, too. It was really enjoyable to deal with such agreeable people.

And, by the way, five years ago when we sang

with the high school chorus in the contest at Pittsburg, this strawberry girl was a member of the chorus from Joplin that took first prize, and the pretty teacher that Perry took home from school—she sang with the Messiah chorus that night. And the strawberry girl remembers meeting Anna. Ask Anna whether she remembers the name—Miss Norton; perhaps she remembers eating dinner at the same table with a girl who had sparkling, laughing eyes, and a pleasing smile, and the prettiest curly bobbed hair imaginable. Maybe Anna remembers her.

And the teacher—well, since he had met her this afternoon he was not very much surprized that Perry made it convenient to drive by that schoolhouse about the time she was starting for home. She knows how to make herself agreeable.

Here Don stopped to read what he had written, and he saw that he had said quite enough—perhaps too much—about those two Missouri girls, so he changed the subject and filled the rest of the letter with an account of his capture of a fine big bass the day before, and a review of a book he was reading.

Perry wrote a letter to Anna that same night. His letter was not as long as Don's letter to Julia, and he did not say much about the two Missouri girls with whom they had become acquainted. He managed to fill several pages without saying much of anything. Then he went to bed and was soon sound asleep.

It was Don's turn tonight to be sleepless. He lay on the hammock where Perry had lain the night be-

fore, and stared up through the dark tree-tops without seeing them.

He tried in vain to banish from his mind the picture of a happy girl with laughing, bright eyes and curly bobbed hair, and the most winsome smile in the world. He felt that he was not loyal to Julia to allow that picture to be in his mind so constantly, but the picture refused to be put away.

Not one word had ever passed between him and Mary that savored in the least of love-making. He had never, purposely, at least, by a look or an act or even by the touch of the hand, sought to convey the thought to her that he was wooing her, or paying attentions to her as a lover. On the occasions when he had gone to Nortons' for berries, and when he and Perry had taken supper there, and when he had taken her to Sunday-school, he had frankly showed that he admired her, and that he enjoyed talking with her as a neighbor enjoys chatting with an agreeable neighbor, but he had conscientiously striven to avoid showing anything more than that. But this afternoon, when she gave him her hand as he was leaving, and her eyes met his for a minute —he knew. He knew that he cared for her. And when he looked into the depths of those lovely eyes he knew that she had lost her heart to him.

He fought against it. He reminded himself over and over again that he was engaged to Julia Jenkins, and he was determined to be true to her. He had no right to fall in love with another girl, and he wasn't going to allow himself to do any such thing. He would propose to Perry that they move their camp to some other locality, so as to get away from

Nortons', and away from any reminder of Mary. He would forget her as soon as he could.

He resolutely recalled occasion after occasion when he had been with Julia; the times when he had taken her to entertainments and parties, and to church; and the times when he and she had read and sung together. But through all this determined effort on his part the picture of a sweet girl with laughing eyes and curly bobbed hair persisted in coming into his mind; and in spite of all his efforts to keep thoughts of comparison between the two girls from coming into his mind, he could not help thinking that the girl to whom he was engaged did not have the happy disposition that the Ozarks girl had.

But—he must put such thoughts out of his mind. He tried to turn his attention to something else. He made an effort to review a book he had been reading. He tried to imagine in what respect the story would have been different if he had written it. Would he have located the story in his home town or in the hill country of south Missouri where—

It began to dawn on him that Mary Norton, too, would have a fight of this kind to make, for her eyes had revealed the fact that she cared. He didn't want to cause her any pain or suffering; he would like for her always to be happy. And yet, was he really sorry to know that she cared for him? He really ought to be, but he wasn't.

Suddenly a thought came to him that almost stunned him. Mary didn't know that he was engaged to another girl! Why hadn't he told her? He had intended to do so on several occasions, but

nothing had been said that had made it easy for him to introduce that subject, and he had simply neglected saying anything about it. In fact he hadn't thought that there was any particular need of mentioning his engagement to another girl, for he hadn't realized that he was drifting toward a love affair.

He would have to let her know about Julia Jenkins. And after that he would avoid seeing her.

CHAPTER 13

ON THIN ICE

The next morning Perry got up bright and early and busied himself with getting breakfast. Don lay still, altho he was not asleep, until Perry called him. Then he got up and dressed, and washed his face and hands without saying a word.

"What's the matter with you this morning?" Perry asked as they sat down to breakfast.

"Nothing."

"You don't seem to be very talkative."

Don remained silent. He drank his cup of coffee, but ate no food.

After a while he broke the silence by asking, "How would you like to load up and move farther into the hill country?"

"Why, what's the matter with this camping-place?" Perry asked. He had one more engagement with Miss Green, and he did not wish to go away until he kept that engagement.

"We might find a place where fish would bite better," Don said.

"Well, we don't need to move our camp. Norton says that there is a deep hole five miles down the creek where there is a good place to fish. Let's get into the auto and drive down there for the day, and come back here tonight."

Don considered this a minute. He felt that the

sooner he got away from Mary Norton the better it would be for him and for her; but, really, he ought to see her first and let her know about his being engaged to Julia Jenkins, so that she would not be looking for him to write to her or to come to see her again. Perhaps it would be better not to move the camp permanently until he could see her once more.

"All right," he yielded to Perry's suggestion, "if that will suit you better."

They did as Perry had suggested. But the fish did not bite well, and they returned to camp by the middle of the afternoon.

Perry changed his clothes and drove by the schoolhouse just as school was dismissed. Miss Green was expecting him. As she got into the auto, and as they were driving toward her home, she seemed fairly bewitching. She had on a becoming, stylish dress, that showed her graceful, shapely form to the best advantage. The skirt was stylishly short, below which the flesh colored silk hose revealed, rather than concealed. Her escort could not help feeling a desire—a passion—to reach out his arm toward Gertie.

Perry proposed going on to town to the "movies." She hesitated about consenting to this at first, but she finally yielded to his request. When they drove by her home they stopped, and she ran into the house to tell her mother that she was going to town with a friend and would not get back until after night.

She hurried out to the car before her mother had a chance to ask who was her friend. They drove into town and went to a restaurant for supper. Then

they went to the "movies." But the picture did not interest them, and they left before it was finished. They got into the auto and started homeward.

When they came to a smooth stretch of road Perry slowed the car down to a snail's pace, and drove with his left hand, while he put his right arm around Gertie. He hadn't exactly forgotten the vow that he had almost made, to act as tho Don and Julia were sitting in the back seat; he would merely modify it a little. But he wouldn't go any farther than to allow his arm to rest lightly around her waist.

"My pupils would be shocked if they could see me now," she mused as she lay her head on his shoulder. "I've been so insistent in teaching my girls to be careful about the rules of propriety, and never, never to flirt, especially with strangers, and here I am carrying on this way!"

Perry thought how badly shocked the members of the young people's group in his home town would be if they could see him. And Anna Barton—why, if anyone should tell her about it, she wouldn't believe it. As for that, Perry himself wouldn't have believed it before he came on this trip.

They came to the place where the road meanders through a strip of timber. He took his arm from around her in order to guide the car, but he did not speed up, and the car moved so slowly that the engine died and it came to a stop. He made no move to start it.

"Oh, Perry!" she remonstrated, "let's keep going. We mustn't stop here."

Still he did not touch the starter.

"Perry," she cautioned him again, "let's go on. What if someone should come by here?"

"No one will pass along this lonely country road tonight," he whispered reassuringly as he took her hand.

"We oughtn't to be doing this way even if no one does see us," she said. But she didn't draw away from him.

"Oh, you're such a lovely girl," he whispered. "Such a lovely, bewitching girl!"

Under the spell of her charms and the overpowering desire to hold her closer in his arms—a desire which increased and became more and more overpowering as he drew her closer to his side, he forgot Anna Barton for the time being, and he forgot his resolution to be as careful in his conduct as he would have been if Don and Julia had been sitting in the back seat looking at him.

He drew her still closer, and she unresistingly yielded to the passionate kiss he gave her.

Neither of them called to mind the prayer that each of them had made that morning: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," or inquired of the inward monitor to see what "leading" the Spirit would give them in answer to that prayer if they would but listen to that voice. Neither of them stopped to consider what he would do if that prayer were really the expression of a heartfelt wish, in order to do his part in making that wish come true.

It is easy for one who is rowing a boat on calm waters to direct and control it. But if the boatman allows it to drift down the river toward the rapids

it becomes more and more difficult for him to control it, until, as it comes nearer to the seething, boiling cataract, he finds himself powerless to turn back or get to the shore. There was a time at the beginning of the acquaintance of Perry Steele and Gertie Green when it would have been easy for either of them to guide their boat into the still waters of safe, friendly companionship. But they had yielded to the promptings of the "natural man" to run the risk of drifting, and to push aside the thought of danger, until now neither of them had the power to get out of the rapids.

Perry got out of the auto under the pretense of having to inspect the tires.

"Let's get out of the car and take a walk," he whispered.

She drew back in alarm. "No, no!"

"Not a soul on earth will ever know."

"But we mustn't get out here, even if no one else should ever find out about it."

He put his arms around her and kissed her. "Oh, Gertie," he whispered, "you're so lovely!"

She yielded to his embrace, and tightened her arms around his neck. "Perry, we must run from ourselves. Get back into the auto and drive home as quickly as we can."

But Perry had played with temptation until he had lost the power, and even the desire, for the time being, to resist it.

So had Gertie Green.

CHAPTER 14

AN UNEASY CONSCIENCE

The next morning Perry was filled with such a sense of shame and condemnation that he avoided meeting Don's eyes, or even looking in his direction. Not for the world would he have let Don, or any of his other friends, know what had happened the night before. He felt that his guilt couldn't help showing in his very countenance, and in his every act. He would rather have gone without breakfast than to sit down to the meal and try to respond to Don's easy, light-hearted remarks, and to keep up the appearance of being happy and of enjoying the outing. But he forced himself to converse as if nothing unusual were on his mind or conscience, even while in the undercurrent of his thoughts he was telling himself that he had made such a contemptible hypocrite of himself that if Don knew what had happened he would be so badly disgusted that he wouldn't feel like speaking civilly to him during the rest of the outing.

After breakfast he hurried up the creek by himself, with his fishing tackle. But he wasn't in the least interested in fishing. The turtles took the bait off his hook, but he didn't care enough about it to rebait it. He sat immovable on the bank, gazing at the cork. He felt condemned—bitterly condemned. How could he go back home and face his

friends? Could he ever again take part in the Bible-class meetings, or in the church choir singing? The other members of the class would despise him if they knew what he had done; and he would despise himself if he should pretend to them that all was well, and take an active part in religious affairs as he had been doing theretofore. Oh, to think that he, after standing before those earnest Christians, and exhorting them to flee the very opportunity and suggestion to go wrong, should tumble headlong into the depths of sin as he had tumbled!

Yet he had meant what he said in that young people's meeting lesson. He had meant every word of it, and he had expected always to live up to it, too. He had simply trusted himself too far. But—hold, wasn't that the very thing he had warned people not to do when he led in the study of the verse, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"? He had walked out *on thin ice,* expecting as a matter of course not to venture far enough to be in danger. Wasn't that the very thing he had declared to be inconsistent for one to do who prays that prayer?

And Anna Barton—she had so much faith in him! How could he carry on a correspondence with her and pretend to be what she thought he was?

As for Gertie Green—he could not help having a feeling of contempt for her. She had occupied such a high place in his estimation until she—surrendered. Yes, he knew he was to blame for her fall, he had coaxed, and made love to her, and led her on in spite of her better judgment and protests, and he

despised himself for having done so. But all the same he had lost respect for her.

To be sure he pitied her. He realized that it was an awful tragedy for an excellent young woman such as she to fall. He knew that her misstep had destroyed her self-respect. He knew that she was so shamed and humiliated that she would not be able to hold up her head or look her school pupils in the eye. He felt that he ought in justice to her go to her at once and offer to marry her. Really she was the only girl in the world that he now had a right to whom to propose marriage; in fact, the ceremony should have been performed a day sooner. But in stepping down from the high pedestal on which she was standing when he first met her she had cheapened herself until he would not have wanted to marry her even if he had never known Anna Barton. He hoped that Gertie would never happen to live in the same community in which he lived, nor ever become intimately acquainted with anyone who knew him.

Moreover, even if he were willing to marry her now, no doubt she now despised him for dragging her down, so that she would never want to see nor hear of him again, let alone marry him.

Besides all that, think what a position he would be placed in if he, engaged as he was to Anna Barton, and working for her father, should marry this stranger and return from his vacation with her as his bride! Oh, it wouldn't do at all!

He was startled at hearing a twig snap behind a clump of bushes not far away. It sounded like the footsteps of someone approaching. The thought

flashed through his mind that Gertie Green's father, or her brother, if she had a brother, was hunting for him, either to slay him or to compel him to marry her. Or perhaps her fiance was hunting for him with a gun. He started up to look for a way of escape. The creek was in front of him. He couldn't steal off to either side of him without being discovered. He would have to jump in the water and wade across. His pursuer might come in sight and shoot even then, but he stood a chance to escape that way. He was all atremble and was ready to plunge into the water, when he saw that it was Don coming from behind the thicket.

"Having any luck?" Don asked cheerfully.

"Haven't caught a thing," Perry compelled himself to answer quietly.

"I haven't either. If the fish don't go to biting pretty soon, let's go back to camp and read."

"Might as well," Perry agreed indifferently.

"Well," Don said as he took a seat on a stone, holding his fishing-pole up at an angle to keep the line above the cork from dangling in the water, "I wonder what Julia and Anna are doing this morning. I suppose—hold, I've got a bite."

He pulled out a sun fish.

"Say, Perry," he exclaimed, "how does it happen that you're getting no bites. I believe there's no bait on your hook."

Perry raised his hook out of the water. There was nothing on it. He drew it to himself in order to rebait it. He really didn't care whether he caught any fish or not, but he didn't want Don to know that.

Don laughed. "Expect to catch fish without bait? You must be preoccupied this morning."

Perry listlessly rebaited his hook and threw it into the water without making any reply.

"Out pretty late last night, weren't you?" Don asked. Evidently he thought Perry's loss of sleep was the cause of his indifference about catching fish this morning.

"Not very. Went to the show in town. That made me somewhat late in getting back."

"Don't you think we'd better break camp and go farther out into the hill country?"

"We might find a place where the fish would bite better," Perry assented. They couldn't move away from this neighborhood any too soon to suit him.

"Fish?" Don snorted. "We might find a place where flappers don't bite so readily!"

Perry made no reply to this. They sat there in silence for a while. Now and then one or the other caught a fish.

By and by Don began to roll up his line. "We've got fish enough for luncheon; let's go to camp."

Without a word Perry drew his hook out of the water and began to wind the line around the pole. Neither of them was very talkative as they were cleaning and frying the fish. Except for a casual remark now and then the meal was eaten in silence. Then Don picked up a book and began to read. Perry tried to do the same thing, but he couldn't give his attention to what he was reading, and he soon gave it up. He left the camp and wandered off into the most secluded, dense thicket he could find. He crawled under a clump of bushes and lay

there with his face on his arms, utterly miserable and self-condemned. He felt that he had lost his religion.

"Oh, Lord, forgive me!" he prayed over and over again. But it seemed to him that his words went against a solid wall. Could it be that his religious faith had died completely? Was there no such thing as forgiveness of sin? Was there not a promise in the Bible that one can be cleansed from sin? Yes, there was, but if he remembered it aright, it was on condition that one walk in the light. Oh, the pity of it—he had not walked in the light.

And suppose that the girl whom he had helped to drag down—suppose that she, after having gone wrong the one time, should go on from bad to worse, and become an outcast. Oh, would he have to answer for her downfall! What is the price of sin anyhow?

In answer to this last question the text came into his mind: "The wages of sin is—"

He shuddered. He didn't want to finish the quotation even in his thoughts.

"Oh, Lord, forgive me!" he prayed. But no answer came, as far as he was conscious of receiving an answer. However, the thought came to him that there was someone else to whom he ought to tell that he was sorry for the wrong he had done, and whose forgiveness he ought to seek before he asked the Lord to forgive him. A part of a verse of scripture came into his mind: "If thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee—"

In this case it was a sister, instead of a brother,

whom he had given cause to feel that he had wronged. But the principle involved was the same.

He couldn't remember the exact wording of the rest of the passage, but the thought, as he remembered it, was that one must first go and right the wrong he remembers having done, and then he will be at liberty to return to the altar.

But if he should go to Gertie Green and ask her forgiveness for the wrong done her there would be only one kind of apology that would count—that would be to go to her with an offer of marriage.

But the very idea of marrying a fallen girl! He could not think of doing that, even tho he had been the one to cause her downfall.

He remembered that he had not written to Anna Barton since Sunday evening. He didn't feel like writing, but he simply must live up to his agreement to drop her a few lines every day or two. He went back to camp and hunted up his pen and paper, and tried to begin a letter. But he couldn't think of anything to write. He couldn't tell her about the affair with the school-teacher, and there was nothing else that he could think of about which to write. He tried several times to write something about fishing, about the scenery, and about what he had been reading, but his attempts were failures, and he tore up the letters. At last he gave it up.

He started out to take a walk. He didn't want to meet anybody, so he went out across the fields, instead of taking the public road, not noticing or caring in which direction he went. Before long he passed through a gap in the hedge into the road. Looking around he saw that he was standing only

a few rods from the schoolhouse where Gertie Green taught. He looked at his watch. It was an hour past time for school to be out, so of course the house would be empty. He listlessly strolled along until he came to the school-yard. Then he turned in and walked toward the building. As he came around the corner of the house he was surprized to see that the door was standing slightly open. As he approached he was still more surprized to hear the sound of sobbing.

Perry stealthily peeped in. There at the teacher's desk was Gertie Green, her arms on the desk and her face buried in her arms, and her whole body shaking with sobs. In one hand she held a letter, which Perry rightly guessed to be one from her sweetheart. He quickly drew back from the door and slipped quietly out to the road.

He made up his mind to get out of that part of the country as soon as they could break up camp in the morning.

CHAPTER 15

DON TELLS MARY ABOUT HIS ENGAGEMENT

Don didn't go over to Nortons' for milk or berries Monday, as he had been doing every evening before that. Tuesday, also, passed by, but he did not go there. They were running short of provisions. They had no bread, and had to eat their fish with dry crackers. There was a cross-roads filling station about a mile away where they could get gasoline for their auto, but there was no store near where they could buy provisions.

Don supposed as a matter of course that when Perry saw he was making no move toward going to Nortons' for provisions he would take it upon himself to make the trip. It was Perry's turn to go for provisions, anyhow. Or, if he did not want to go to Nortons', he could at least drive into town and lay in a supply of eatables. But Perry seemed to be "in the dumps," and not inclined to get away from camp, or even to talk, or to show himself to be sociable. He was acting as tho he didn't care whether they had anything to eat or not. What had come over him, anyhow?

Don made up his mind to go to Nortons' this evening. He really longed to see Mary. While he told himself over and over again that it would be better for him not to see her, he couldn't help feeling glad

that their shortage of food gave him a good excuse for going over there. Besides, he would have to manage in some way to let Mary know, by some casual remark while conversing with her, that he was engaged to another girl. It wouldn't be fair to her for him to allow her to think that he was courting her seriously, or to allow her to expect him to write to her after he went away.

Mary was at work on her knees weeding her flower-beds when Don came into the yard. She glanced around when she heard his footsteps approaching. When she saw who it was a look of gladness spread over her face, and she raised up and held out her hand in greeting. "Why, hello, there! Where in the world have you been keeping yourself lately?"

Don clasped the proffered hand as he answered, "Oh, we're camping in the same old place."

"We've missed you. You know when a huckster's most regular customer fails to show up he naturally wonders what is the matter. Daddy thought perhaps you had broken up camp and gone away; but I felt sure that you wouldn't leave without coming by to wave your hand good-by to us."

"Of course not," he assured her. She looked more charming than ever. "My, what pretty flowers you have!"

"Yes, they are pretty, aren't they? There are some chairs on the front porch. Come and sit down awhile."

"I—ah—think perhaps that I'd better pick some berries, if you still have berries to spare."

"Plenty of them. But I have several boxes al-

ready picked for you. So you may as well sit down and rest a while. We have a fresh loaf of bread for you, too."

She led the way to the front porch and dropped into a chair, pointing to another one for him to take.

"How is Mr. Steele?"

"About as usual, thank you."

"One of the school pupils told me that he drove by the school-house in his auto just as school was out Monday afternoon and took Gertie home."

"Yes, he has done that several times."

"I suppose, as a matter of course, that he knows she is engaged to be married."

"Yes, she told him that."

"I thought she would. She is too good a girl to play the coquet, or to pretend that she is receiving a man's attentions seriously just for pastime. I have no use for a flirt."

Don sat perfectly still for a minute. Then in order to do his share of carrying on the conversation he inquired, "Is Miss Green going to be married soon?"

"This fall. Her fiance is working away from home this summer. He expects to build a house on his eighty this fall, and then they will be married."

"Is she getting a good man?"

"Yes, one of the finest young men in the neighborhood. He is working at the carpenter's trade in order to get money enough to build his house. James Dunn is his name."

Don suddenly sat bolt upright. "What's that? James Dunn, did you say?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"He helped build Perry's house, and he worked on mine, too."

She looked at him in surprize. "You are building a house?"

"Yes."

She turned her eyes toward a flower-bed out in the yard and gazed at it in silence.

"You know—ah—that Perry and I," he began lamely, then stopped. After a minute he tried it again. "You know that Perry and I am—ah—are expecting to get married this fall."

She did not raise her eyes from the flower-bed at which she was gazing, nor betray by as much as the movement of a finger the fact that she was almost stunned by the announcement. However, her face had grown very white.

Lest the silence should become embarrassing Don felt that he had to go on talking. So he went on to say, "Our girls are out on a pleasure and sight-seeing trip. They will sail for Europe in a few days —from New York."

After a minute she said quietly, "That will be a fine trip for them."

He took out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his face. "It's a hot afternoon," he murmured.

She made no reply to this.

"I—ah—guess—perhaps I'd better get my bread and berries and go," he said miserably as he arose from his chair.

She brought out the boxes of berries and a loaf of bread wrapped in paper and handed them to him.

He reached his hand into his pocket.

"Never mind the pay," she said. "As you are planning to move your camp tomorrow you probably will not need any more supplies from us, so just accept this as a neighborly offering to speed the departing guests. Good-by, Mr. Rankin."

With that she turned and walked into the house.

She was quiet and self-controlled until she was safely locked in her own room. Then she threw herself on the bed and cried as if her heart would break. She refused to see anyone the rest of the evening, giving as a reason that she was suffering from a severe headache.

As Don was returning to camp he wondered how Mary came to know that he was contemplating moving camp. He hadn't told her so. It began to dawn on him that whether or not he had up to this time contemplated going away she knew that after she had suggested moving the camp he would surely move.

He arrived in camp just as Perry was returning from his walk past the schoolhouse where he had seen Gertie Green crying her eyes out at the teacher's desk.

Neither of the boys had much to say as they prepared and ate their supper, altho each of them did his best to appear to be cheerful. Could this be the same camp they both thought was such a veritable Eden only a week before? Certainly thorns and briers had taken the place of roses tonight.

"You didn't go out driving this evening," Don observed.

"No." Then in order to turn the conversation to safer ground, Perry hastened to ask the question,

"Did Nortons have anything to say of special interest while you were there?"

"No—o, nothing worth mentioning. Hm—m, yes, there was one thing that cropped out in the conversation that may be of special interest to you. I believe that Miss Green told you she is engaged to be married. Did you ever find out to whom she is engaged?"

"No, I never asked her."

"Well, it is James Dunn."

Perry gave a start. "What's that you say?" Then with an effort to gain control of himself he held himself rigidly still.

"Her fiance is James Dunn," Don repeated; "the young man who worked on our houses, and who was so deeply interested in our young people's lesson that night. You remember that he told us he was going to be married this fall."

CHAPTER 16

SICKNESS

Perry felt that his outing had been ruined, and he didn't want any more of it. However, it wouldn't do to end the vacation and return home before the three weeks were up. How could he explain to his friends why he had become tired of his long looked for vacation before the time was up for him to get back to his job? No, it wouldn't do to go back home now; but he wanted to get away from that neighborhood, and the sooner the better.

When he proposed to Don early the next morning to break camp and move farther on to where fishing was better, he was rather surprized to see how readily the latter fell in with the suggestion. If he had only known it Don was intending to propose that very thing himself and Perry simply beat him to it.

When they had packed their things in the automobile and were ready to start Perry asked, "Shall we drive by Nortons' and bid them good-by?"

"No!" was Don's emphatic answer.

Perry was surprized. "What has come over you, Don? They have been good neighbors to us."

"I know they have."

"And the girl has been very friendly, especially to you. It will look to them as tho we lack the elements of common courtesy if we go away without speaking to them."

"You may call on them if you wish. I don't care to. However, we might drive by the schoolhouse and bid the teacher good-by."

"I guess we'd better be on our way without stopping to make calls on anybody," Perry said as he started the car.

They drove along in silence for a while. After they were three or four miles away from the neighborhood in which they had been camping Perry asked, "Don, why was it that you didn't want to stop to bid Norton's good-by?"

Don didn't answer for a minute or two. Then he said, "Well, Mary seemed to have the idea that we were going to move camp today and that my call last night would be the last one I'd make, so she bade me good-by."

"What made her think that we'd move today?"

"H—m, well—ah—I suppose she thought that—ah—after saying good-by to her I wouldn't see her again. That is—she seemed to suggest our going on."

Perry puzzled over this explanation a minute. "Don, what did you and Mary quarrel about?"

"You didn't understand me to say that we had a quarrel, did you?" Then in order to forestall further questioning Don turned inquisitor. "How did it come that you didn't want to drive by the schoolhouse and bid Miss Green good-by?"

Perry did not answer.

By and by they came to a wayside spring in a secluded dell and pitched their tent there.

That night Perry tried to read his Bible. For a time he went over the words on the page to which

he had opened the book, but he couldn't "withdraw the wanderings of his mind." What was the use in his trying to read the book anyhow? He had wrecked his faith and thrown away his religion. He who had talked to others about the wonderful promises which he was now so indifferently pretending to read had acted as tho he didn't think that these promises were worth the self-sacrifice needed to gain their fulfilment or the effort that would need to be put forth to resist yielding to the desires of the flesh in order to hold to one's faith and his right to stand on the promises.

And yet Perry had been sincere in taking the stand that the promises are true. Then suddenly his mind wandered back to Don's startling announcement to him about Gertie Green's fiance.

At the thought of James Dunn Perry fairly turned cold! James was a clean, honest young fellow; how terribly he had wronged him. He had talked religion to him; preached to him; and then had failed so miserably to live up to his own teachings by leading astray a girl who had turned out to be the fiancee of this same James Dunn!

He thought of how often he had been filled with a desire to lead people to Christ, and how often he had expressed a wish to be able to lead the erring one in the way back into the fold; but he groaned within himself when he asked himself how much of an effort he had made to preach salvation to Gertie Green the night when he saw that she was weakening in her determination to live true to her faith! Preach salvation from sin! Why, what he had

preached to her was the very message that the devil himself would have preached to her!

Oh! It had been in a moment of weakness that he had made this great mistake, but it seemed to him that the results of his years of upright living and patient efforts to walk in the way of righteousness had all been nullified—utterly destroyed—by this one lapse—this giving way during a time of weakness.

By and by he gave up trying to read. He went to bed. And as he lay there he tried to pray. But he couldn't pray; he simply couldn't make himself believe that he would be heard, or that he would receive anything of the Lord.

The next morning he went to a little town not far away for gasoline. He heard some men in the store talking about a news item which they had read in the morning's paper concerning a girl who had committed suicide the day before, and he stopped to listen. The girl's lover, it seemed, had gone back on her because he thought she had been unfaithful to him. Perry's heart almost stopped beating when he heard this. He refrained from showing any interest in the news or conversation. He stood still, leaning against the counter with a show of indifference, until he was sure that he had control of himself. Then he bought a paper and went out to his car. After he had driven safely out of town he stopped the car and opened the paper. He was trembling when he found the news item on the front page of the paper. Eagerly he glanced through the story to see who the unfortunate girl was. In a

minute he saw that it was a waitress in a restaurant, and not Gertie Green after all.

He threw away the paper with a fervent, "Thank God!"

He didn't want to go back to camp to face Don. The latter couldn't help seeing that something was wrong, and if he didn't already suspect what the trouble was he surely would before long. Moreover, when the time came for him and Don to return home, he certainly would have to face an ordeal. His friends would expect him to go right back into the church choir and Sunday-school and young people's work, and take an active part in the meetings just as he had heretofore. He couldn't do that. Oh, he simply couldn't do that! The idea of publicly taking part in a Bible reading on some subject relating to chaste conduct, or living one's religion! Why, every time he would attempt to read a verse or utter a word of exhortation his conscience would be shouting, "Hypocrite! Hypocrite! Hypocrite!" And yet if he should remain away from the meetings, and refuse to have anything to do with religious matters —that of itself would be a give-away. How would he explain it? For his friends would certainly demand an explanation.

Besides that he was haunted by the thought that an officer might step into the bank while he was waiting on customers, and serve summons on him, and he would have to stand a public trial and exposure and disgrace. Or some day Gertie Green might tell her father or brother what had occurred, and they would immediately hunt him up, and there would be the devil to pay sure enough. Or James

Dunn, her affianced lover, might suddenly rush into the bank with a loaded revolver, and—he shuddered —and—at the inquest everybody would find out about the whole affair.

Moreover, even if she should never let her father or brother or lover or anyone else know what had happened, she herself might at any time, even after he and Anna Barton were safely married, drop in to see him, and under threat of bringing suit or exposing him demand that he pay her money for her support at regular intervals.

When he came back to camp he was startled to see another automobile standing there. The first thought that came to his mind was that officers, or Gertie Green's relatives, were hunting for him. Yes, there were two men talking with Don! They had already seen him as he came around a thicket near the camp. It was too late to steal away and hide. He would have to put on a bold front and pretend that he had no idea on earth that they had come after him.

He got out of the automobile and walked up to the men. To his surprize Don introduced them to him, and they shook hands with him cordially. It soon appeared that they were tourists passing that way, and, seeing Don in the camp, they had merely stopped to chat a few minutes.

After the men had gone Don turned to Perry with the question, "What's the matter, Perry?"

"Nothing. Why do you ask that?"

"You looked as if you had seen a ghost when you first came back into camp. Did you have a near collision while you were out on the road?"

Perry turned and walked toward the tent as he called back, "No. Nothing happened at all."

The two worked together to prepare a good noonday meal. Perry began to feel that he had been very foolish to imagine that the suicide story in the paper had been about Gertie Green, or that the men who had stopped in camp had come to get him. He assured himself that Gertie wasn't going to commit suicide; neither was she going to tell her father or brother about the affair. He was almost cheerful as he and Don sat down to dinner, and he ate a hearty meal.

After dinner Don threw himself on the cot for an afternoon's siesta. Perry thought he'd try his luck fishing a while. There was a deep hole up the creek that he wanted to try. If he followed the creek around the big bend he would have to walk two miles to this hole; but if he cut across the fields he would have to walk only a mile. He chose to cut across.

Some ominous looking black clouds hung low in the northern and western sky, but Perry decided that they were not likely to come overhead for a while, so he paid but little attention to them.

The sun was shining very hot, and as he trudged across the open fields it seemed to him that he had never felt the heat so in all his life. There was no breeze and the sun's rays poured down on him until they made his head throb and ache before he was half way across the fields. A black cloud that had been hanging low on the horizon suddenly began to grow larger and to move across the sky. The lightning played back and forth across its lowering, dark-

ening face, and peals of thunder sent ahead warnings of an impending storm. A constant low rumble could be heard. The seething, boiling clouds began to take on a terrifying greenish cast.

Perry turned and began to hurry back toward camp. A breeze sprang up, and this suddenly increased into a strong wind. In what seemed to be a very few minutes the whole face of the heavens became overcast, and rain-drops began to splash about him. The number of drops quickly increased until it was raining so hard that he could not see the woods a short distance ahead. Then there was a lull for a minute—an appallingly ominous lull. Then a hail-stone dropped a few yards ahead; another one fell a little to his right; a few more began to strike and bounce around. Then the very bottom seemed to fall out of a great reservoir of hail and rain overhead, and Perry found himself struggling along in such a torrent of ice-water and hailstones that it fairly took his breath. It seemed to him that he was drowning in that deluge of falling water. And cold —he was almost numb with cold. The fact that he had been so very hot just before this flood began to pour over him made the cold all the worse.

He tried to run toward the camp, or at least to get to the shelter of the timber. He slipped and stumbled as he ran. At last he came to a big tree at the timber's edge and stopped there. Presently the storm began to abate, and in a short time it passed on.

A few minutes later Perry dragged himself into the camp, bedraggled, chilled to the very marrow of his bones, and sick. Possibly the fact that the icy

drenching came so soon after a hearty meal made him feel all the worse. He was thankful to find that it was dry in the little tent. He undressed and went to bed on one of the cots. He called on Don to put more covers on him, until all the bed-clothes they had brought with them had been tucked over and around him. Yet he lay there shivering with cold for a long time. By and by the chill began to pass off and he began to grow warm. He tossed the covers back, but he kept growing warmer until he was burning up with fever.

Don sat at the bedside ready and anxious to do anything he could to relieve his friend's sufferings—sat there the livelong night, bringing a cup of fresh water now and then, bathing the sick man's face once in awhile, and fanning him with his straw hat.

Toward morning Perry's fever began to go down and he felt a little more comfortable. He begged Don to go to bed and sleep the rest of the night.

Don refused to do this. "I'll wait until you are better, old boy," he said. "But I'm wondering—"

Here he stopped. Perry waited a minute for him to finish his sentence, but the sentence was left unfinished.

"Wondering what, Don?"

"I've been thinking about a verse in the Bible that I read a day or two ago, 'God is a very present help in trouble.' I've been wondering why you haven't suggested our looking to him for help in this time of trouble."

Perry lay very still for several minutes. Then he answered, "I—ah—that thought has been in my mind a good deal during the night. But—"

"But what, Perry?"

Perry wouldn't trust himself to look into the eyes of his friend, who was so eager to do all he could to help him. "Don, I'm not worthy."

"Not worthy to pray? Why, it's the sinner, not the righteous, that has need of the Great Physician."

"Yes, I know, but—well, you know one must have faith."

"But you've always had faith heretofore. Why haven't you now?"

The sick man didn't want to explain that his own misconduct had brought upon himself a feeling of condemnation and a fearful looking for of punishment, instead of the assurance of security that is a part of faith.

"There's no use to pray unless you have faith that the prayer will be answered," Perry moaned.

"Why, Perry, what has come over you? You've got the blues."

"Now Don, you go to bed and get a few hours sleep."

"I don't understand you lately, Perry. But I'll do as you say, provided you promise to call me if you need anything."

"Yes, I promise."

Don tumbled over on the cot which he had been using as a seat, and was soon sound asleep.

Perry felt that this little sickness had brought him face to face with a serious matter. He was ashamed to pray for needed help, and if he had tried to pray he wouldn't have had a particle of faith that his petition would be heard. He had never before felt so utterly helpless. Not once during the long

restless night had he been able to bring himself to the place where he could feel that it would be of any use for him to pray for Divine help. He recalled the old song that used to be his favorite,

> "Oh, what needless pain we bear,
> All because we do not carry
> Everything to God in prayer."

Had he forfeited his right to take everything to God in prayer? Must he hereafter bear pain that would have been needless if he had kept the faith? If his faith failed to bring the fulfilment of the promises that pertain to the here and now, what hope had he as to those pertaining to the hereafter?

"O Lord!" he groaned within himself; "The cost is too great! How long, oh, how long, must I keep on paying!"

CHAPTER 17

TELEPHONING TO NORTONS

The sun was coming up over the hills before Perry fell asleep. It was nearly noon before he awoke. When he opened his eyes he saw Don sitting by the side of his cot, anxiously watching him, and patiently driving away the flies with a leafy branch cut from a tree.

"How are you feeling now, Perry?" Don asked solicitously.

"Not very well."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing that I can think of."

Don prepared some food and brought it to him, but the sick man had no appetite and could eat only a few bites.

"If there is anything under the sun that you think you could eat," Don said, "let me know what it is, and I'll get it for you if I can. There's a farm house about a half mile away, and it is probable that we can get some provisions there."

"I can't think of anything that I want."

"I'll go over there and get some milk. And—say, do you think you could eat a piece of fried chicken?"

"Maybe I could after a while."

"Well, if there's a fry to be found in this part of the country I'll see that you have one."

"You are good to me, Don. Better than I deserve.

I hope this little sickness of mine won't spoil your vacation."

"Don't you worry about that one minute."

"What are we going to do about getting our mail, Don? Some letters may come to Nortons' for us."

"I'll have to see about that. I'll get word to Mr. Norton in some way to forward our mail to the little town where I go for gasoline. Do you think it will be all right for me to leave you alone long enough to hurry over to that house?"

"Sure it will. I'll get along all right."

"And, Perry, you ought to be doing something to help yourself get well. Perhaps I'd better have a doctor come to see you."

"No!"

Perry didn't want a doctor to come to see him. A doctor might ask questions in order to understand the case, and he didn't want to be quizzed. He knew well enough that his troubled conscience and disturbed mind had much to do with his sickness, and he didn't want a doctor or anybody else to try to find out what it was that was on his mind and conscience. But he didn't propose to tell this to Don.

"No," he repeated; "I don't need a doctor. I'll be all right in a day or two."

"Well, have your own way," Don submitted: then in his own mind he added, "for the present. But if he's not better by tomorrow morning something's going to be done!"

Don brought in a bucket of spring water and put it at the side of the cot where Perry could reach it. Then he set out across the pasture to the farm-house of which he had spoken. A family by the name of

Ferguson lived in this house. Mr. Ferguson was at work repairing a binder in the barnyard. Don introduced himself and made known the fact that he and his partner were camping back on the creek and the latter was down sick.

"He has no appetite," Don went on to say, "or, at least he couldn't eat anything that I had to offer him. I want to see if I can get some milk for him. And I'd like to get a young chicken, too, if you have any that you'd sell."

"Why, of course we'll let you have a chicken for a sick man, and all the milk you want, too. Is he very sick?"

"I hope not. But he hasn't sat up today."

The man caught a young chicken, and filled Don's bucket with sweet milk from the cool springhouse.

"I see you have a telephone," Don remarked as he noted the wire running to the house.

"Yes, we are on a party line."

"I wonder if I could get through to order our mail forwarded."

"Probably you can."

"We were camped about fifteen miles northwest of here, and we had our mail sent to the rural delivery box of a farmer who lived near where we camped. If any mail came after we left there we'd like him to forward it to us."

"Is there a phone at the place where your mail was sent?"

"Yes, they have a phone all right, but I don't remember the number."

"Do you know the name of the farmer?"

"Yes, it is Norton."

"Norton? Oh, I know him. We talk to him over the telephone every once in a while. Yes, you can call him up. Come right in the house."

They went to the phone and put in a call. But central failed to get Norton on the line. Don waited as long as he felt that he dared to be away from Perry, then he told Mr. Ferguson that he'd have to hurry back to his sick friend.

"Well, you go back to him," the farmer returned; "you may be needed there. And if central succeeds in getting Norton on the line I'll talk to him and tell him to forward your mail."

"Thank you. I'll certainly appreciate the favor if you'll do that, for I can't wait here any longer."

"Where shall I tell him to address your mail? You can have it sent right here to our rural delivery box if you wish."

"Thank you. That will be handy to our camp. You may tell him to do that, if you will."

Don hurried back to camp with the provisions. He found Perry asleep. He noiselessly threw some mosquito-netting over the sick man, slipped out of the tent, and set about killing, cleaning, and frying the chicken.

It was only a few minutes after Don left Ferguson's that the telephone bell rang. Mr. Ferguson answered it and was informed that they now had Norton on the line. Ferguson called out, "Hello, Norton."

"Hello!" came back the answer; "This is Mary Norton."

"All right; you'll do. This is Ben Ferguson."

"Oh, is it? Well, how are you?"

"All well. Say, Mary, you remember those two young men who were camped near your home several days ago?"

"Yes"—Mary seemed to catch her breath. "What about them?"

"They are camped on the creek near our home, and one of them is very sick."

Mary's voice betrayed a good deal of alarm as she quickly asked, "Oh, which one?"

"Well, one of them came over to our house this afternoon. It is the other one that is sick. I don't know the names of either one of them."

"Was it the darker one of the two?"

"I don't know, for I saw only one of them."

"Is he very sick?"

"Well, I haven't seen him yet, so I can't answer that question, but he isn't able to sit up, and I think he must be pretty sick. I'm going over to their camp right away to see how he is."

"Oh, I hope he's not very bad!"

Mr. Ferguson was surprized to note that Mary's voice sounded as tho she were crying.

"Well, what I called you up for was this. They want their mail forwarded to my box number here. Your father knows my box number: Box 14 on R.F. D. Number 3."

"All right. There are several letters for them now. We'll forward them at once. Mr. Ferguson, will you do us a favor? When you go to see them this evening, if you find out that the sick man is dangerously ill, will you call us up?"

"Yes, I will."

CHAPTER 18

WAITING FOR NEWS FROM THE SICK MAN

When Mr. Norton came in from the field Mary was at work in the kitchen. The instant he stepped into the room she greeted him with the announcement, "Daddy, there was a telephone call for you this afternoon."

"Who called?" he asked.

"Ben Ferguson."

"Well, of all things! What did he want?"

Mary was keeping her face averted. But as she turned to set a skillet on the stove he saw that she had been crying.

"He said that the two young men who were camping over on the creek a few days ago had pitched their tent near his home, and they want you to forward their mail to Mr. Ferguson's box."

"Well, we'll readdress and post these letters before the carrier comes in the morning."

"And, Daddy, Mr. Ferguson said that one of them is very sick."

"What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know; but he's not able to sit up." She turned her face so that her father could not see that she was having a hard time to keep back the tears.

"Which one of the boys is sick—Perry or Don?"

"He didn't say, but I feel sure that it's Don."

"Well, it's hard luck to be sick and away from home, and in a tent. If they were nearer I'd run over to see them this evening."

"They are only fifteen miles away—less than an hour's drive with an auto. And the roads are graveled so that they are not muddy."

"Well, if I could have an early supper I might decide to run down there."

"You can eat right now if you wish to." And without waiting for him to come to a decision in the matter she poured his coffee and set the eatables by his plate. "Mother's out to the milk house. She won't expect you to wait for her if you are going to make that trip."

Mr. Norton obediently sat down to the table. "Do you want to go with me to call on Ferguson?"

"No."

"That's funny. As a usual thing when the auto goes you are ready enough to go along. And you haven't seen Fergusons for a long time."

"I wouldn't mind going to call on them, of course. But—well, if I should go with you those boys might think that I am running after them. I'm not, and if either of them thinks that I am, I want him to get rid of that idea right now."

"All right. It would be a rough ride for you anyhow."

"You can take a few boxes of berries and a dozen fresh eggs to them. But don't intimate to them that I was the one to suggest your doing so."

Mr. Norton was soon on his way. After he had gone Mary went out to the hammock under the shade-trees in the yard. She lay there, fanned by

the breezes of the summer night, gazing up through the overarching branches at the stars twinkling in the deep darkness overhead.

She was thinking to herself that by this time her father had reached the place where Don and Perry were camped. By this time he knew which of the young men was sick. She wondered whether he was dangerously sick, and whether, even if he was not going to die, he was in for a long sick spell and was now too bad to be moved. Just think of lying sick in a tent! It would be hard on the one who was sick, and it would be hard on the one who had to take care of the sick one.

If Don was the one who was sick—and she felt sure that he was—she wondered whether his affianced sweetheart would give up her tour to Europe and hasten back from New York in order to see him. She felt sure that if she were in that sweetheart's place that's exactly what she would do. The European trip could wait until the man she loved was restored to health. What pleasure could she take in viewing the Alps when her heart was with a sick man in the Ozarks?

She reproved herself for being so much affected by the news of this man's sickness. Other acquaintances of hers were sick; some of them friends that she had known a long while; why should his sickness disturb her more than theirs, seeing that he was another girl's sweetheart, hence nothing more to her than a chance acquaintance, and he never could be anything more to her than that?

She reproached herself for allowing her mind to dwell so much on another girl's lover. When she

had discovered, a few days before this, the fact that he was engaged to another girl, she had then and there resolved that she would banish him from her thoughts. But she hadn't been able to keep that resolution. In fact it had been hard for her to think of anything else but him. She thought of the several times when she had helped him pick strawberries, of the time when he and Perry had taken supper in her home, and when they had gone to Sunday-school with her and Gertie. Always Don had behaved as a perfect gentleman in her presence. He had been courteous and gallant, yet never once had he attempted to become unduly familiar, or to show the least disposition to become "spoony." She felt that in justice to him she would have to admit to herself that if she had fallen in love with him it had not been because he had deliberately sought to win her love, or because he had given her any reason to think that he was making love to her. Perhaps that was the very reason why she had fallen in love with him, and why she had fallen so hard.

And yet in her own mind she condemned him for not letting her know sooner than he did about his being engaged to another girl. If he had done that she would have been on her guard against coming to care for him too much. She had tried to make herself believe that she didn't care for him at all; that it was nothing to her that he was engaged to someone else; and that his mentioning the fact, or failing to mention it, was a matter of no concern to her at all. But when the news came that he was sick—at least she took it for granted that he was the one who was sick—she was forced to acknowledge to

herself that she wasn't as indifferent as she had been trying to make herself believe that she was.

She wished and hoped, yes, she prayed fervently, that when her father returned he would bring favorable news, and that the sick man would soon be well again.

She had no thought of going to bed until her father came back with tidings from the sick man.

It was nearly two o'clock when Mr. Norton returned. He put the auto in the garage and came into the house just as Mary came in from the hammock.

"Why, daughter, why are you up this time of night?"

"I just didn't want to go to bed. How's the sick man?"

"He seems to be somewhat better tonight. He was able to eat a little supper. I think he'll be all right in a few days."

Mary breathed a fervent, "Thank God!"

Then she remarked, "I suppose Mr. Steele is all right, too?"

"Steele? Why, he's the one who is sick."

"He is? I thought it was Don."

"No; Don's all right. He hasn't been sick at all."

Mary could not prevent a look of relief from showing in her face, altho she tried with all her might to appear indifferent. She arose from her chair with the remark that it was time to go to bed. As she was leaving the room she paused a minute in the doorway, and without looking around toward her father she inquired, "I suppose they were glad to get their letters, were they not?"

"Yes, they thanked me for taking their mail to them."

"They—didn't—say whether—ah—whether their letters contained any news of special interest, did they?"

"No, they didn't read their letters while I was there."

CHAPTER 19

LETTERS

Perry's sickness proved to be not very serious, after all. He was soon walking about the camp, and a day or two later he was able to go to the banks of the creek and fish.

The boys decided that there was no need for them to hurry home, but that they would stay there during the rest of their vacation.

A few days after Perry recovered from his sickness he received a long letter from Anna. They were having a fine time, she said. There were a number of other agreeable people in their touring party, and all were counting on having a delightful time going across. But, for all that, she could not help looking forward to their return home as the most enjoyable part of the trip. She had seen a good many pretty homes, but she just knew that not one of them was as happy a home as theirs was going to be. A day or two ago she had seen some flower-beds in front of a cottage that were arranged in such an attractive way that they had given her some good ideas as to how they could beautify their yard. Think how much fun it would be for them to work together evenings after he came home from the bank!

She hoped he would have as good a time on his vacation as she was having on hers.

Perry read this letter over the second time. Then he put it in his pocket and went out for a long walk up the creek. He took a seat on a rock at the base of a tree, and thought over the situation a long, long time. Anna was such a fine, upright girl, and she was so true to him; he felt so unworthy of her love and fidelity. She had so much confidence in him, and felt so sure that he had always lived up to his highest ideals. He felt himself a miserable deceiver—a hypocrite—whenever he thought of the wrong he had been guilty of doing. And yet he wouldn't have her know of his misdeed for anything on earth. How would he answer her letter? Nevertheless it wouldn't do to let it go unanswered.

He went back to camp and began a letter to her. It didn't suit him, and he tore it up and began another one. This was no better than the first, and it, too, was destroyed. But he simply must write her a letter, so he made another attempt. But what should he write? The only thing of special interest that had happened was his affair with the schoolteacher; and he certainly didn't want to tell Anna Barton about that. And yet, no matter what he started to say, the self-condemnation that he felt on account of that affair crowded into his mind, and he found that his attention and interest had strayed from what he had begun to write. Finally he gave it up.

Don, too, received a letter from his fiancee. In her letter Julia made a half humorous attempt to tease Don about the "Flapper of the Hills," as she called the girl whom Don had written about as the one who had helped pick strawberries. This strawberry

girl may live away off in the woods, Julia said, but it was very evident that she had enough of the eternal feminine about her to know how to set about captivating a beau as well as did her more fashionable city sister.

She had asked Anna whether she remembered anything about eating at the same table with this Norton girl during the musical festival at Pittsburg five years ago. Anna didn't remember anything about her except that she appeared to be a very bashful, "green" young country girl. She must have improved a great deal since then, judging by the way a certain young hardware merchant seems to have fallen for her charms.

When Don read this he wondered what Julia would think if she knew how close to the truth she had come in this joke about his falling for this girl's charms. Julia went on to say that she was glad to know that the boys were meeting with such agreeable and attractive people. Friendly intercourse with the people with whom they came in contact would add much to the pleasure of their trip.

She, too, was finding that her enjoyment of her sight-seeing tour was augmented by the friendliness of other members of the touring party. There was one young man especially, a Mr. Dunkirk, a distant relative of her second cousin's wife, who was gallant and agreeable, and who was very attentive to her. He had taken her to the opera twice. "So you see, Don dear, that there are sociable people in other places besides the hill country." Of course she didn't have the privilege of inviting Mr. Dunkirk to help her pick strawberries in the garden, but she

could accept his invitation to eat a dish of berries and cream in an ice-cream parlor.

Don smiled to himself as he read this. Evidently Julia was trying to make him jealous. He was rather surprized at himself that he was not more disturbed by this letter than he was. But even as he sat with it in his hand, thinking over what Julia had written, and dreamily reviewing some of the pleasant evenings he had spent in her company, his thoughts wandered back to the strawberry patch at Nortons' and he seemed to see a jolly, light-hearted girl with laughing, dancing eyes and a bewitching smile. And that girl was not the one to whom he was engaged to be married. But down deep in his heart he knew that it was the one he longed most to see and talk to this evening. He would rather have had the privilege of helping Mary Norton pick a box of berries right then than to go to grand opera in the finest opera house in Paris with any other girl on earth.

CHAPTER 20

BACK HOME

In some way the three weeks of the vacation passed, and the boys drove back home. Their friends, who were expecting to see them come back rugged and refreshed, were surprized to see that Perry looked haggard and tired. He explained this by telling them about the spell of sickness he had while they were camping.

He felt guilty of deceit when Judge Barton gave him a cordial greeting as he entered the bank. What if the Judge knew of the guilty secret he was hiding? He felt himself a hypocrite when his friends dropped in to greet him, and when the patrons of the bank cordially shook hands with him and assured him that they were glad to see him back in his place again. What would they think if they knew?

Many a time during business hours did he wonder how the girl teaching in the schoolhouse near where he and Don had first camped was getting along.

When he went to his room at night he took a seat in front of the open window, and as he gazed with unseeing eyes out into the starry night he wondered whether the fallen teacher was able to hold her head up and go on teaching school. If not, what would she do to make a living in case her marriage should fail to take place? If she gave up her Sunday-school

class—and surely she wouldn't have the face to pose as a teacher of righteousness and purity to a class of innocent young people after making the misstep she had made—what excuse would she give for refusing to teach it any longer?

He wondered whether her lover, James Dunn, ever suspected the truth. If he did he would be inclined more than ever to discredit the gospel story and the testimony of those who profess to believe it. So much for his attempt to lead Dunn unto the light! Oh, the irony of it! And what a pity it was—what a tragedy—that he who professed to be a Christian, who had always thought that he was ready and eager to do all he could to point the erring one to the way that leads to life, had helped persuade someone to become an erring one! Go back and work in religious meetings with this stain on his soul? He couldn't think of doing that!

A committee appointed by the church to raise funds to endow a home for fallen girls came to him soliciting a donation to the fund. He hastily subscribed the amount he was expected to give without giving the members of the committee a chance to argue or explain why this fund should be raised. After they had left the bank he was made miserable by the thought that if he had done right while on his vacation he would have done more for this cause than he now could do if he should subscribe every cent he had in the world.

He had made up his mind that he would not go to the meeting of the young people on Sunday evening. He was afraid that they would call on him to make some remarks or to discuss the Bible lesson and

he felt that he simply could not stand before those earnest young Christians with that awful feeling of guilt resting on him. He could not presume to talk religion to them. And it would be embarrassing for him to refuse to take part in the discussion of the lesson especially if questions were put to him directly.

Just before time for the meeting Don and another of his young men friends dropped in, expecting Perry to go with them to the meeting. He cast about in his mind for some excuse to give them for declining to go, but they vigorously overruled every excuse he made. And really he couldn't think of any excuse that was worth considering, except the truth; and he certainly didn't want to make that known. So he yielded and went with them.

Questions had been assigned to different members, and the leader called on one after another to answer the question that had been assigned to him. Perry was beginning to get over his uneasiness and to congratulate himself because he was not going to be called on to say anything. Presently this question was read: "In what way will the approval of conscience affect one's faith?"

The leader looked around the room after reading the question. "This was assigned to Minnie Wright, but she is not present. Will someone volunteer to answer it?"

She waited a minute, but no one spoke. Then she called out, "Brother Perry Steele, let's hear you on this question."

Perry fairly turned cold. He arose mechanically. He would have to say something. Heretofore he had

always been ready to respond to questions asked and to do what he could to make the discussions interesting. What would they all think if he should refuse now? But even as he raised to his feet, in his mind's eye he could see Miss Green looking at him as if to say, "What! Are you going to attempt to instruct these young people? You?" He put this thought away from him; he knew that she was not there, and that she would never know what he might have to say. But he didn't want to talk. There wasn't anything that he wanted to say. But it wouldn't do to tell that to the members of the society; so he would simply have to talk. My, if he should attempt to answer that question from the standpoint of his recent personal experience, he could make them all sit up and take notice! But he didn't purpose to do that. However, he knew some things that might be said on this subject. The time was when he would have said these things with interest and enthusiasm; but he felt no such interest or enthusiasm now. He couldn't help thinking that if they knew or suspected what he had done they would never have called on him to make any remarks in this meeting.

"Hypocrite!" he kept calling himself as he tried to collect his thoughts to speak on the subject. He began by quoting a verse that he had committed to memory back in the prevacation days: "If our heart condemn us not, we have boldness toward God, and whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do the things that are pleasing in his sight."

When he was committing that verse to memory he

had been deeply interested in it, but now he quoted it merely because he knew that it had a bearing on the question, and not because he felt any particular interest in it, or because he cared whether the hearers would see anything in it. "God in heaven," surged through his fevered mind, "is my religious interest as dead as that?"

He went ahead and made a five-minute talk, and all the time he was wondering what Miss Green would think if she were present.

He hurried away after the services were over without waiting to give the others a chance to chat with him or to ask him how he had enjoyed his vacation.

That night Perry forced himself to answer the long descriptive letter he had received from Anna Barton. In order to fill the space he told all about how the workmen were getting along with the new house, and with the grading and leveling of the yard. The new home would be ready for occupancy when Anna would return in the fall.

But all the while Perry was writing this letter he was wondering whether he could greet her on her return just as if nothing had happened since she went away, and he was wondering what kind of a predicament he would be in if he should go ahead and marry her and afterward be confronted by Gertie Green with a demand for him to contribute regularly to her support and a threat to tell Anna about the affair unless he complied with that demand.

CHAPTER 21

DAMAGED GOODS

James Dunn was working on a small dwelling-house in Picher. After quitting-time one evening he went to the post-office and inquired for his mail. He received a letter. Glancing at the address on the envelop as he came out onto the sidewalk he recognized Gertie's handwriting.

This was the first letter that he had received from her for two weeks or more. He could not understand why she had suddenly become so negligent about writing. Heretofore she had been very prompt about writing, seldom allowing more than two or three days to pass between letters. Moreover, the last one he had received from her had not been like the bright, interesting, newsy letters she had been accustomed to write to him; it had been a formal affair, written as tho the writer had been under restraint, or as tho she had tried to fill a required number of pages without saying anything. He had answered this letter promptly and had waited patiently ever since to learn what was the trouble. The fact that so long a time had elapsed before the next letter came only served to deepen the mystery and to make him wonder all the more what in the world was wrong.

He put the letter in his pocket without opening it and hurried on to his boarding-house. Not until he

was safely in his room with the door locked did he venture to open and read the letter.

"Dear Friend James:

"No doubt you have been wondering why I have allowed such a long time to pass without writing to you. Don't think for a minute that the long delay was because I had forgotten that it was my turn to write. A dozen times every day I have thought about writing to you, and I have tried to write several times, but each time I found that I had failed to express in words the thought I was striving to convey to you. So I did not send these letters.

"The fact is, I have something important to say, and it is very, very hard to say it. Even now I find myself at a loss as to how to proceed. Isn't it too bad that no skill in the use of language or figures of speech can make an unpleasant message to be other than unpleasant?

"I have been trying to find a way to lead up to what I want to say—to lead up to it in an easy way so that you will not be shocked or hurt by the very suddenness of the announcement. But I can't think of a way to do that. But—

"I have been thinking of our engagement, and I have decided that it will be best to break it, and to release you from your promise to me, and ask you to release me from mine to you. I have put the ring you gave me, and all the letters that I ever received from you, and the several books you sent to me, and the other gifts and mementoes that you gave me—I have put them all in a box, and I shall wrap and

seal this box, and send it to your home for you to get when you return there.

"Please take this as final, James. It will be useless for you to entertain the thought that you can persuade me to change my mind. I know what I'm doing. "Your friend,

"Gertie Green."

James felt stunned. Mechanically he replaced the letter in the envelop and put it back into his pocket. He sat there staring at nothing. What in the world had happened to turn Gertie against him in this way or to cause her to break her engagement? The last time he had been with her, only a little more than a month before, she had been as happy to be with him as could be, and she had talked with him about the new house they were planning to build on the eighty-acre farm, and about the flower-beds they purposed to arrange in the yard, and about how happy they would be in their new home. They had mutually agreed that they would never quarrel, neither would they ever be unkind to each other. What under the sun had caused such a change to come over her?

Why, it couldn't be that Gertie had really meant to end their engagement! It must be that he was just imagining that. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out the letter to assure himself that he had only imagined that what she had written was a request to be released from the engagement. He had surely read it wrong. But no, there it was in plain black and white, and in Gertie's hand-writing, too. He had lost his sweetheart!

Grieved, puzzled, hurt, he sat there wondering what had happened to cause this trouble. Gertie did not say, or even intimate that she had ceased to love him, or that she had discovered that she cared for someone else. She did not charge him with having been unfaithful, neither did she intimate that she had wakened to the fact that he did not measure up to what she desired in a husband. What, then, was the trouble?

At last he made up his mind that he was going to find out. He had a right to know, and he would go straight to Gertie herself and demand an explanation.

He went to bed. He did not sleep much that night. Early the next morning he went to the man for whom he was working and asked for a leave of absence for a few days. This was granted. Then he went to a garage whose owner was an acquaintance of his, rented an automobile for a few days, and started for home.

He arrived at his father's place early in the afternoon. He stopped there long enough to brush his clothes and wash his hands and face, and pass the time of day with the home folks. Then he went to Greens'.

Gertie came to the door in response to his knock. When she saw who the caller was, the color left her face and she looked as if she were going to faint. James caught her in his arms.

"Gertie, sweetheart!" he exclaimed as she unresistingly yielded to his embrace for a minute.

Then she resolutely stood up straight and withdrew a step. "I was taken by surprize," she gasped.

"I—ah—when I came to the door, I had no idea it was you who had knocked. Won't you have a chair, James?"

He accepted the invitation. She, too, took a seat.

"I wish to have a heart-to-heart talk with you, Gertie," he said, "a strictly private talk. Come and go driving with me; then we shall be alone."

"As far as privacy is concerned there is no one else at home just now. But I don't see that any good will come from a heart-to-heart talk. My letter was plain enough to be understood. You know that we don't wish to have a quarrel. Talking the matter over would be painful to both of us, and I assure you that it will do no good."

"Gertie, what's the matter?"

She did not answer.

"Why did you write that letter to me?"

"Well—when I saw that—ah—I was not going to marry you, it would have been unjust to you not to tell you so without any delay, wouldn't it?"

"But why did you conclude that you were not going to marry me? You don't charge me with being unfaithful to you, do you?"

"No, no, no! Certainly not!"

"And you don't mean to say that you were trifling with me when you told me that you loved me."

"No." She did not raise her eyes from the floor as she half whispered, "No, I wasn't trifling, James."

Oh, if he would only stop this probing, and not insist on knowing why she had to break with him! She would not for the world have him to know that

she had forfeited her right to marry him by disobeying the seventh commandment; or that by her folly she had made herself unworthy to become his wife. It would simplify matters if he would only take it for granted that she had ceased to love him and that she really desired to get rid of him. But Gertie Green was not a liar, and she couldn't tell him that.

"Gertie, you are not fickle, are you? You're not the kind of girl to imagine one day that you are head over ears in love with a man, and to cease to care for him the next?"

She raised her eyes just a minute and glanced at him. She must allow him to think that. That would be better than to risk having him continue to probe until he began to suspect the truth.

"Have you come to the conclusion that you don't care enough for me to marry me?" he insisted. "Is that what the trouble is?"

Her silence gave him the impression that he was guessing close to the truth.

"Do you wish me to understand that there is no use whatever in my trying to regain your favor?"

Slowly she raised her eyes to his, "Yes, that is what I wish you to understand. It will be better for us to see each other just as little as possible, and to forget that we ever were sweethearts. It would be cruel for me not to tell you this plainly."

He arose from the chair and walked to the door. Turning around, he stood there a minute looking at her. She remained seated, trying her best to assume an air of indifference which she did not feel.

"Good-by, Miss Green," he said coldly as he went out.

"Good-by, Mr. Dunn," she returned.

He never knew that as soon as he was safely out of sight she collapsed on the divan and lay there sobbing for a long time. James Dunn never knew how she moaned over and over again, "O James, if you knew that I had been unfaithful to you, you wouldn't want to marry me. But I couldn't tell you that. It would kill me to have you know the real reason why I released you from your agreement. I haven't ceased to love you—it is breaking my heart to give you up—but, oh, I couldn't be so unjust to you as to go ahead and marry you just as tho I had kept myself worthy."

A little later she whispered to herself, "Damaged goods!" She didn't know where she had heard the expression, but it seemed fittingly to describe herself. "Cheapened, damaged goods!"

CHAPTER 22

AMONG OLD ACQUAINTANCES

James drove over to his own place after leaving Gertie Green's home. He turned in at the gate and parked under one of the big trees that he had purposely left for shade in the yard when he was clearing the land. He did not get out of the automobile. From where he was sitting he could see the place which he and Gertie had picked out as the spot on which the house was to be built. Over to one side was the young orchard which he had planted. These fruit-trees were thrifty and well cared for. In the front a number of young ornamental shrubs were growing. With how much interest he and Gertie had watched these plants growing, and how eagerly they had looked ahead to the time when the new house would be standing in this pretty yard!

For the first time he took but little interest in looking at these things. Why should he care now whether the trees and orchard would make pleasing surroundings for a home?

He sat there for a long time, but he was not thinking about anything that would be seen from where he was sitting in the car. He was brooding over his interview with Gertie Green.

After a while he backed his car out into the road and drove to his father's home. His parents and brothers and sister were glad to see him and they

gave him a hearty welcome. The pleasure of meeting and talking with the members of his own family deadened for the time being the pain caused by his sweetheart's casting him away. The jolly chattering when they all gathered around the table for the evening meal, and the pleasant visit with the family afterward, their sympathetic interest in hearing about the work he had been doing and the people he had met and the sights he had seen, all acted as a balm for the hurt he had received. He felt that he had friends at home, no matter if some of his other friends did desert him.

Not until they were about to retire for the night was any mention made of Gertie Green. When his mother announced that it was time to go to bed she turned to James with the remark, "I suppose you'll go to see Gertie tomorrow?"

"No, I saw her this afternoon," he answered.

She could see from his looks that something was wrong. "What's the matter, James?" she asked.

"Nothing much, only our engagement is all off."

"You don't mean that!"

"Yes, I do."

"What's the trouble?"

"That's what I'd like to know. All I know is that I got my walking papers."

"I wonder," Mrs. Dunn hesitated, "whether the camping of those two young Kansans over on the creek had anything to do with causing her to want to break her engagement with you."

"What two young Kansans? Do you know their names?"

"Steele was the name of one, I think. And the other—let's see—wasn't it Rankin?"

"What's that you say? Did they camp over there?"

"Yes. Do you know them?"

"Yes. I worked on their houses. Did—ah—did Gertie get acquainted with them?"

"Yes. They took her and Mary Norton to Sunday-school. Besides that, Gertie went driving with Steele several times."

As James lay awake that night thinking over the situation he came to the conclusion that he had found out why Gertie had ceased to care for him. She had lost her heart to Perry Steele. Well, if she was the kind of girl who would become infatuated with another man in that way, her breaking her engagement with him was a deliverance rather than a misfortune. He knew of a girl who lived not far away—Nellie Howard, an old sweetheart of his—who wouldn't have been fickle enough to act in that way.

The next morning he learned that there was going to be an ice cream sociable in the schoolhouse yard that night, and he made up his mind to stay over another day in order to be present at this neighborhood gathering.

In the afternoon he drove over to Greens'. Mrs. Green answered his knock at the door. When he told her that he would like to see Gertie, she invited him to come in. She left the room, but soon returned with the message, "Gertie asks to be excused from receiving company today. She is lying down on the bed in her room, suffering from a severe headache."

Without another word James departed. He never knew that someone peeped out of an upstairs window to see him as he was leaving; or that that someone was crying as if her heart would break, "Oh, it's so hard to give him up, but I haven't any right to see him now."

As he drove past Nortons' he saw Mary at work weeding her flower-beds. He stopped to talk with her a few minutes.

"Mary, do you know what's the matter with Gertie?" he asked.

"With Gertie? Why, is there something the matter with her?"

"She has thrown me over."

"Broken the engagement, you mean?"

"Yes. Do you know why?"

"No. I didn't know that she was even thinking of doing that."

"Two young men were camping over on the creek a few weeks ago."

Mary's face changed color, but she said nothing.

"It didn't take them long to break into society in this neighborhood, did it?"

Mary looked down at the flowers. The color deepened in her face, but she remained silent.

"Do you happen to know who the girls were whom these young fellows courted here?"

Mary looked up quickly. "Courted?"

"Yes, courted."

"Why do you use that term? Mr. Rankin and Mr. Steele took Gertie and me to Sunday-school one afternoon and spent the evening with us afterwards, and Mr. Rankin came to our place several times for

berries. And Mr. Steele took Gertie driving a few times. Do you call that 'courting'?"

"That depends on what was said and done on these occasions."

"Well, as far as Mr. Rankin was concerned, I'll give you to understand that never once while he was with me did he say anything that could be called 'courting,' or that was intended to invite me to bestow my affections on him; and never once did he act soft or spoony. Nothing was ever said or done when he was with me that would have caused embarrassment if a third party had been present. He is a perfect gentleman, and he treated me as a lady."

James toyed with a pansy blossom which he picked from the flower bed. "Yes," he admitted, "as far as I have ever seen the young men are gentlemen; they seem to be conscientious Christians, too. I don't suppose they would trifle with a girl's affections, or pretend to be seriously courting her when they had nothing in mind but a little pleasant conversation and social pastime. But—Mary, could it be that if a girl was with a young man of this kind frequently she might lose her heart to him, even if he did not intentionally woo her?"

Mary's face flushed more deeply than ever, and she dropped to her knees and began to pull weeds from the flower-bed in order to hide her confusion.

"Of course I don't mean you," James hurriedly went on to explain, mistaking her confusion for anger, "but something has happened to Gertie. Her love has been turned away from me. I wonder if this isn't the explanation."

"I can't answer for Gertie, of course. Nothing

passed between her and Mr. Steele while I was present that savored of love-making; but I was never with them when they were alone."

"Well, Mary, don't mention to anybody what I've said to you, or even let anyone know that I ever spoke of the subject to you."

Mary promised.

James drove over to the home of Nellie Howard. Just as he parked in front of the gate he saw her going into the garden to dig some potatoes for supper. He went out to where she was. "Hello, Nell!" he called out as he went through the garden gate.

"Why, hello, James!" she returned cordially. "When did you get back to this part of the country?"

"Yesterday."

He took the hoe from her. "Here, let me dig the potatoes for you."

"Have you come back to stay?" she asked as he stooped to pick up the potatoes he uncovered with the hoe.

"No, I have a few weeks more of work over there yet. I'm going back tomorrow."

"Your visits home are short. I suppose, however, that you'll soon come back here to stay."

"Possibly so. I'm not sure about that."

"Why, what's the matter now? I thought that you were going to build a house this fall and settle down."

James carefully scratched some potatoes out with his hoe, and stooped down and put them into the bucket. "Well, I did plan to do that. I'm not so sure about that now."

Nellie waited for him to go on and tell what had happened to cause him to contemplate changing his plans, but he did not do so.

He picked up the bucket of potatoes and the two started walking slowly toward the house.

"I suppose you will go to the sociable at the schoolhouse tonight," she remarked.

"If I do, will you go with me?"

She looked at him in surprize. "Are you in earnest?"

"Yes, I am. I'd like to have you go with me."

"Why, ye-e-s, I'll be pleased to go with you. Only—"

"Only what?"

Still she kept silent.

"I suppose you are wondering why I'm not going to take Gertie to the sociable."

"One naturally would be curious to know why."

He stopped at the garden gate and turned to her. "Nell, Gertie has returned my ring and released me from the engagement. I'm free now."

CHAPTER 23

PERRY IS REMINDED OF THE PROMISED VISIT

One evening a month after his return from the Ozarks, Perry strolled out to see how the work on his house was progressing. The plastering was done, the walls were thoroughly dry, the carpenters were now putting on the window and door casings and getting everything ready for the interior varnishers and decorators.

Mr. Simpson was at work on the casings. Perry took a seat on a nail keg and watched him work for a while. The carpenter would saw a casing board to the right length, then lay it on the workbench and smooth it with his plane. Then he would work on it with sandpaper and a scraper until the board was smooth and polished.

Before long the time came to quit work. Perry wandered out into the yard and took a seat on an empty box that was standing under a tree between his house and Don's. As he sat there listlessly whittling a piece of pine Don came into the yard and took a seat on the box by his side. While they were conversing about the progress of the work on the houses they heard someone coming out of Don's house. Looking up Perry was startled to see that it was James Dunn.

He had seen James at a distance since his return

from the vacation trip, and he had known that the young carpenter was helping Simpson finish the two houses, but he had not been close enough to speak to him.

Perry was uncertain as to what kind of a reception James would give him. He was very much relieved to see that the young man from Missouri gave him and Don a friendly nod, and took a seat on a bundle of shingles close by. Perry judged by this friendliness that James had not found out anything about the vacation romance with Gertie Green, else he would not have been so friendly.

"Your house will soon be ready for occupancy," the carpenter observed.

"Yes," Don replied, "they are going to be ready before we are ready to occupy them."

"I'm going to begin work on mine next week."

"We saw your place when we were over in your part of the country," Don said. "You have a pretty place for a home."

"It suits me, all right."

They talked a while on different subjects. Then, to Perry's dismay the subject of religion was introduced. That was the subject, above all others, that he wished to steer clear of, especially in the presence of James Dunn.

He whittled away on a pine stick and allowed Don and James to do all the talking. He scarcely knew what they were talking about. He recalled his singing at the young people's meeting one time early in the summer the song, "I Want Everybody to Know." He remembered how earnest and sincere he had been when he sang it. At that time he really

did want everybody to know about the gospel, and he had a great desire to help carry the glad tidings to those who did not know. And he had been especially eager to help James Dunn to know and to persuade him to come into the church. What a change had come over him! What had become of his deep interest in religious matters and of his eagerness to have others accept the gospel? He didn't feel interested enough now to attempt to answer the questions James was raising. Was he dead? Dead religiously? Interest dead, faith dead, desire to help others into the light dead?

But the young man from Missouri did not seem to notice the fact that Perry was allowing Don to do all the talking.

By and by James arose. "Well, I must be going. How did you boys enjoy your trip over in our part of the country?"

"First rate," Don answered. Perry made no reply.

"I heard that you were well entertained while you were there. Well, Perry, don't forget our agreement to exchange visits as soon as we get settled in our new homes."

"Certainly not!" Perry bluffed promptly. "When your bride sends us an invitation notifying us that she and you are ready to receive visitors, we'll be glad to go."

He knew well enough that Gertie Green would never in the world write any such letter. Undoubtedly he was the last person on earth that she would want to entertain in her home. However, Perry felt sure that James did not in the least suspect this.

"I've changed my plans a little," James said.

"In what way? Different house from the one you told us about?"

"No. Same old house, same old eighty acres, but a different girl."

Perry could hardly keep from giving a start. "Different girl?"

James turned to go. "Yes," he called back. "Miss Green sent my ring back to me, and I gave it to another girl. But that needn't change our agreement to exchange visits. The one I'm going to marry will make you just as welcome in our home as Miss Green would have done."

CHAPTER 24

A QUARREL

Anna Barton and Julia Jenkins were resting in their room in a hotel in Paris. They had been out sight-seeing every day, and had gone to the opera every night until they were tired out. So they had remained in their rooms in the hotel this day in order to rest up.

Anna had written a long letter to Perry Steele. Julia was intending to write one to Don Rankin, but she kept putting it off until the day was almost gone and she had not even started to write one.

"Aren't you going to write to Don?" Anna asked.

"Oh, maybe I'll write a few lines after a while," Julia yawned.

"You haven't written to him for more than a week, have you?"

"Well, what of it? What is there to write about?"

"Why, I find so much to tell Perry that I can't crowd it all in my letters. I have to leave a lot to tell him personally when I get back home."

Julia shrugged her shoulders.

Anna might have reminded her that during the first few weeks after they left home Julia had found plenty to write about. But that was before Mr. Dunkirk had become so attentive to her. Furthermore, it was very evident that she was able to find plenty to talk about when she was with Mr. Dunkirk, judg-

ing by the fact that the two usually loitered behind the other sight-seers, often too busily engaged in conversing to pay much attention to the sights.

"Are you going to the opera tonight, Julia?" Anna asked.

"Yes. Aren't you?"

"No."

"Didn't Mr. Myers invite you to go with him?"

"Yes, he invited me, but I'm not going with him."

"Why not? He's a good man. Entertaining, too."

"Yes, he's entertaining."

"Then, why didn't you accept his invitation?"

"Julia, I've gone with him several times, and you know as well as I do that it wouldn't be right for me to encourage him to pay his attentions to me under the circumstances. I'm going to remain true to the man to whom I'm engaged. I'm no flirt."

"No harm in your being sociable and friendly with others, is there?"

"No, but you know very well that if I should go with Mr. Myers every time he asks me he would soon be past the merely friendly stage. And you know, Julia, that Mr. Dunkirk long since passed that stage with you."

"I don't care if he has! I like to go with him, and I'm going."

"How about Don?"

"Oh, he's having a good time. I suspect that he was as badly smitten on that vamp of the hills—that 'strawberry girl' that he wrote about, as I am on Mr. Dunkirk."

Anna said no more. She did not go to the opera

that night. But Julia Jenkins went, and Mr. Dunkirk went with her.

After the opera was over the latter couple went into a restaurant. They were given seats at a side table. The room was fairly well filled, and people were coming and going, and laughing and chatting all the time; they could talk without being heard by anyone.

"Have you received any letters from Kansas lately?" Dunkirk asked as they were waiting for their order to be filled.

"Yes, I received a letter from my mother today."

"Any letter from your friend Rankin?"

"Yes."

"He still writes to you as regularly as ever, does he?"

"Of course he does."

"How is his romance with the strawberry girl of the Ozarks coming on?"

"I suppose there's nothing doing. Just a summer-time flirtation, I guess. He has never mentioned her since he returned from his vacation trip."

"Hm-m, I was hoping it would develop into something serious."

"Think if it did you could carry on your summer-time flirtation with me to better advantage?"

"Julia, you know very well that I'm not carrying on a summer-time flirtation with you. You know that if I were not serious I would never have proposed marriage to you."

The waiter brought their order to them. Nothing was said when he was setting the food on the table and arranging the dishes. As soon as he was through

and the two were once more alone Mr. Dunkirk said, "Have you given your friend Rankin a hint that you are thinking of releasing him from his engagement?"

"No. Why should I do that as long as I am undecided in my own mind as to what I wish to do?"

"My dear, you can't keep two dangling on your line forever."

"Well, I haven't asked you to keep dangling, have I?"

He ate in silence for a minute. "No-o, but you haven't answered my proposal yet. You expect me to dangle until you do answer it."

"I don't like to be scolded so much," she pouted. "Anna read me a lecture this morning."

"What about?"

"Not writing to Don, and going to the opera with you."

"Well, Julia, if you don't intend to break your engagement with Don—as you by your actions have been leading me to believe that you intend to do—Anna was right!"

She shoved her chair back from the table and arose. "Indeed! I like that! What do you mean by my 'actions'?"

"Sit down, Julia," he pleaded in a low tone. "Don't make a scene here in public. This crowd here needn't know that we are close to a quarrel."

She resumed her seat. "Talk of some other subject, then," she demanded.

CHAPTER 25

A BROKEN ENGAGEMENT

Time passed. Perry was beginning to recover his spirits to an extent. However, he had not been successful in reviving his religious faith and interest. In private he read his Bible, but what he read therein did not bring him peace and freedom from condemnation. He was still haunted by the thought that a girl had gone wrong through his persuasion, and he wondered what had become of her. Would she go on down the road to ruin? Would her guilt be found out in spite of her attempts to conceal it?

He received two letters from Anna Barton one morning about three months after he had come back from the camping trip. One had been written while the writer was on board the steamer crossing over to this country; the other had been written after she landed in New York.

He opened the first one and read:

"Dear Perry:

"I have some news for you that will surprize and shock you. You know that I have in several of my letters to you mentioned the fact that Mr. Dunkirk had been paying his attentions to Julia, and that the two were together a great deal. I have seen for sometime that they were falling in love with each other. Hence I was not very much surprized when Julia told me that she had promised him that they

would be married when they landed in New York.

"If anybody had told me before we started on this trip that Julia would turn out to be so fickle, I wouldn't have believed it for a minute.

"I am aware of the fact that when she and Mr. Dunkirk first began to be interested in each other she had no thought of ever falling in love with him. But the more she was in his company the more she wanted to be with him, and the less inclined she was to consider what would come of it all.

"They were both out for a good time, and they enjoyed being together, and they thought that was all there would be to it.

"I feel so sorry for Don. I think he has been treated shamefully. I do hope he'll get somebody else to occupy that new house with him who will prove to be more worthy of his love than Julia has been."

When Perry finished reading this letter, he exclaimed, "Well—I'll—be—hanged!"

He gazed at the letter a minute, then muttered to himself, "Well, the double wedding won't take place as planned. That's one thing sure!"

The second letter informed him that they had landed in New York and would start for home the following day. She told him to meet her at the station when the evening train came in from the east the next day after he received this letter.

When he read the last letter he forgot the other one for the time being. Anna was coming home—would be home tomorrow! He repeated this over and over to himself. Then he reread the letter to assure himself that it was really true that she was

coming home. His hand was trembling when he stuffed the letter back into the envelop and put it into his pocket. He was first glad, then sorry. One minute he was overjoyed to think that Anna would soon be at home; the next minute he was fearful. He was extremely nervous and uneasy, and filled with a nameless dread. He wished that she had remained in New York a few days, which would give him a chance to regain his composure.

His new home was all ready to receive her as his bride. Nevertheless, he felt that he had no right to marry Anna Barton. She had kept her record clean; she had a right to demand that the man who was expecting to marry her should have as clean a record as she had, and she took it as a matter of course that Perry had kept his record clean, too. He felt that he ought, in justice to her, at least tell her about the misstep he had made before another move was made toward getting ready for the wedding. And yet he couldn't, and wouldn't, do that. He wouldn't have her to know about it for all the wealth of a dozen worlds. Even if something should happen to keep them from getting married he would want her to keep her respect for and good opinion of him and always to remember him as one worthy of the high place in her estimation that he had before she went away.

He put the letter in his pocket and walked toward the bank in a daze, asking himself what he should do. Should he let Anna remain deceived, and go ahead and marry her? Or should he disappear—go away off somewhere, and begin life anew?''

But while he felt like running away, he knew full

well that he would do nothing of the kind; neither would he tell Anna about the wrong he had done. He would pretend that all was well, and would marry her, and become heir to Judge Barton's wealth, and go on feeling himself a hypocrite. As for the unfortunate school-teacher—he shrugged his shoulders.

His head was aching as he entered the bank.

When he took his place at the cashier's window Judge Barton, passing through the room, greeted him. "Well, I heard something this morning."

Perry turned pale as he stammered, "What did you hear?" Could it be that the affair in the Ozarks had been found out?

"Why, that Anna and the folks will come in on the west bound train tomorrow evening."

"Yes, I heard that," Perry answered, with a sigh of relief.

When Perry came out of the bank after closing hours his head was hurting worse than ever.

Don Rankin overtook him on the sidewalk.

"Perry," he said, "I want to have a talk with you. Let's go some place where we can be alone."

"All right. Let's go out to our new houses. Call a taxi; I don't feel well enough to walk."

"What's the matter, old boy?"

"Nothing serious. Just headache."

Don called a taxi. Nothing was said as they drove out to where the two new houses, now completed and ready for occupancy, were standing side by side.

Don unlocked the front door of his house, and the two went in.

The room in which they were standing was well furnished. A new rug was on the floor, and several new chairs and a library table were in the room.

Don pointed to an easy chair, and took one himself.

Perry was glad to take the seat, and lean his aching head against the high back.

"How do you like it?" Don asked, indicating by a sweeping gesture that he was referring to the furnishings of the room.

"Everything looks homelike," Perry answered. It was very evident, so Perry thought, that Don had not yet found out that Julia was not intending to keep her engagement, or that she was about to marry Dunkirk. Perry saw that he would have to break the disagreeable news to him.

"Don, have—ah—have you heard from Julia lately?"

"Got a short note yesterday."

"Was there—ah—anything of particular interest in it?"

"Yes. She sent me a notice of dissolution of partnership."

"Notice of what?"

"Termination of our engagement."

So Don had found out about it, after all. Well, he seemed to be taking it very coolly.

"Do you know what came between you and her?" Perry asked.

"Yes. Dunkirk."

Perry was surprized to see how well Don was bearing up under the trouble. He even seemed cheerful.

"Julia never did care for me as much as she thought she did," Don went on to say presently, "or at least as much as she made me think she did; else she wouldn't have changed to Dunkirk the way she did."

"Well, you don't seem to be heart-broken over the turn affairs have taken."

"No. Possibly that fact shows that I wasn't as completely captivated by her charms as I thought I was. You might say that our quarrel began when you and I were on our vacation trip. I wrote to her in a joking way about going to Nortons' for berries, and about how much fun it was to have Mary help me pick them. In her next letter to me Julia told me about a young man named Dunkirk who was with the touring party, and who had been showing her marked attentions, and she jestingly gave me to understand that she could carry on a flirtation as well as I could.

"Well, I never mentioned Mary Norton in any of my letters after that, for I was doing all I could to forget her. But I soon saw from Julia's letters that the affair between her and Dunkirk was developing into something more than a mere flirtation. Her letters came further and further apart; they contained fewer references to the home we are building and to our plans for the future; and more and more about Dunkirk, and about how gallant he was and how ready he was to minister to her comfort and happiness. I wrote back that I could be just as gallant to other girls as Dunkirk could be to her. I suppose that gave her the excuse to tell me that I was free. Anyhow she did it."

"Don, that affair between you and Mary Norton didn't go far enough to arouse Julia's wrath?"

"No—o, ah—it didn't. Never a word or act of love-making passed between Mary and me. I never was with her alone except for a very short time on a very few occasions, and if Julia had been present unknown to us she would not have heard a word or seen an act that was not all right.

"But I'll tell you something now that I wouldn't have hinted to a living soul if Julia had not gone back on me, for I was resolved to be absolutely loyal to her—I'll tell you now, that while I was careful not to do or say anything that savored of love-making, yet in my own mind and heart I wasn't half as indifferent as I tried my best to appear to be. I fell for Mary's charms, and I fell hard, too, altho I never let her suspect it. To me she seemed to be the loveliest girl in the world. I simply had to run away from her. You remember that I wouldn't allow you to drive by Nortons' to bid them good-by. I never wrote a line to her since we left there, altho I longed with all my heart to hear from her. For Julia's sake I did all I could to keep my caring for Mary secret, and to overcome it. But I'm free now."

"What are you going to do?"

"Do? Well, for one thing, I don't want this new home to stand vacant. And I don't want my friends to feel sorry for me on account of having been jilted by Julia Jenkins. If I'd have had a little longer notice I'd like to have tried to have a bride in this home before she gets here with her husband. Anyhow, I'm going to make a trip to Missouri soon."

"Don, I wish you success."

CHAPTER 26

ANOTHER TRIP TO THE OZARKS

Don set his alarm clock so he could get a very early start the next morning. Before any of his neighbors were up he was speeding in his automobile on his way to the hill country of south Missouri, to the same locality in which he and Perry had camped early in the summer.

He drove up to Mr. Norton's gate and parked his car. Then he went to the door and knocked. Mrs. Norton answered his knock. When she saw who the caller was she shook hands with him and invited him to come in.

Instead of accepting the invitation at once he paused to inquire, "Is Miss Mary at home?"

Mrs. Norton hesitated a minute before she answered, "When she comes in I'll ask her whether she is at home."

Don bowed his head. "I hope she will be. If you'll allow me, I'll wait and see."

She showed him into the living-room and pointed to a seat.

"I suppose your friend, Mr. Steele, completely recovered from the sickness which overtook him when you and he were camping down in Ferguson's neighborhood?"

There was an icy politeness in her voice and manner that was not like the cordial hospitality that

she showed when he used to call there during strawberry time.

"Yes, he recovered his health. I trust you have all kept well this summer?"

"As well as usual, except—well, Mary hasn't been in very good health lately."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

She glanced in his direction as he spoke, then turned her gaze out of the window. "We're having pleasant weather," she remarked.

"Yes," he agreed with her.

There was an embarrassing pause. Then, casting about in his mind for something to say in order to keep the conversation going, he asked, "Is Miss Green teaching school again this fall?"

"Yes. I heard that she expected to be absent today, and that she has a substitute teaching in her place."

They heard Mary coming into the kitchen, softly singing to herself. Mrs. Norton arose quickly and started into that room to intercept her daughter and tell her who had called, but before she reached the door between the two rooms Mary bounced into the living-room exclaiming, "Mother, do you know—"

Suddenly she saw Don, and she stopped short. She turned deadly pale, and for a minute looked as if she were going to faint.

Don arose from his chair. "Mary!" he said, as he took a step in her direction and extended his hand towards her.

She quickly regained control of herself. "How do you do, Mr. Rankin!" she said as she gave him her hand. "I didn't know that anyone was here,

so I was taken by surprize." Her face was still white.

Don went back to his chair and she took a seat on the divan on the opposite side of the room.

"I—ah—suppose you are well?" he asked.

"Reasonably well, thank you, Mr. Rankin." The color was beginning to come back into her face.

The smell of something burning came into the room from the kitchen. "There!" exclaimed Mrs. Norton, "I've let my beans boil dry!" And she hurried into the other room to look after the cooking.

"Are you taking another vacation outing, Mr. Rankin?" Mary asked.

"No. I'm off just for the day."

"You must have left home early."

"Before daylight. I came purposely to see you."

She would not trust herself to look in his direction. "Has your fiancee returned from Europe?" she asked. Evidently she asked this question in order to remind him of the fact that he was an engaged man, and that it would be out of place for him to become sentimental.

"Julia Jenkins will arrive home this evening. But—"

"Then you'll have to drive hard in order to be on hands when her train gets in."

"But what I wanted to say—"

"I suppose she enjoyed herself on that tour," Mary interrupted. She didn't purpose to give him a chance to tell her that he wanted to see her so as to have one more talk with her while he was still single, or to explain that he had not meant to trifle with her affections when he came to see her so

frequently in strawberry time. She wasn't going to allow him to suspect for one minute that she had been hurt in the least, or that she had been suffering and fighting against a hopeless love all summer.

"Well, yes, but—"

"We are having delightful weather now. Your trip back home this afternoon will be much pleasanter than it would be if the roads were muddy."

"Mary, my dear—"

She sprang to her feet. "Mr. Rankin, you are forgetting yourself!"

He, too, raised to his feet. "No, I am not forgetting myself. Won't you allow me to explain—"

"I can't see that there is anything to explain, Mr. Rankin."

He reached for his hat. "Perhaps you are right. If your words and manner are indicative of how you feel toward me it would be useless for me to say anything more."

"Certainly it would."

He moved toward the door. "I came a long way to tell you something, Mary. I see you don't care to listen."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Rankin. Don't let us misunderstand each other. This is the last time we'll see each other, you know, and I don't want you to go away feeling unkindly toward me. But—" She hesitated and seemed about to lose control of her voice. Presently she resumed, "but you know, on the very eve of your marriage neither you nor I would want anything to be said between us that would cause the least embarrassment if it should come to the ears of your sweetheart, or—" here

she raised her eyes and looked into his defiantly, "or to mine."

"Yours?" he stammered helplessly. "I didn't know—"

She dropped her eyes to the floor, but said nothing.

"You are right, Mary. I wouldn't have wanted to say what I wished to tell you if I had known that you were engaged to someone else. You see I didn't know. That is, I wouldn't have wished to tell you all that I had in mind to say, but I don't see any reason why I shouldn't have gone on and finished the sentence that I began two or three times when you stopped me."

She raised her eyes to his for a minute. "You may finish it now."

"I started to tell you several times that I have no sweetheart now—"

She suddenly reached out for the back of her chair to steady herself.

"Julia wrote me a letter releasing me from my engagement and announcing her engagement to another man. Please believe me, Mary, when I tell you that if I had not been released from that engagement I would not have driven over here to tell you what I came to tell you. I don't want to lose your good opinion of me. My intentions were honorable."

Mary dropped back into her chair and covered her face with her hands. "O Don," she sobbed, "I was not just to you in my mind. I thought that you—"

She did not finish her sentence.

He took another step toward the door. "I trust

that your lover appreciates the treasure he is getting, and that he will always be good to you."

He held out his hand toward her. "Good-by, Mary."

She stood up. It was a minute before she could control her voice enough to speak. "Don, I have no sweetheart."

He stood staring at her a minute, then he opened his arms and exclaimed,

"Mary!"

CHAPTER 27

A SUMMONS FROM THE TEACHER

Perry didn't sleep much the night after he received Anna's letter telling him that she would arrive home the next evening. When he went to work the next morning his head was aching worse than it had ached the day before. He could not eat anything at noon, but he took his place at the window in the bank and managed to attend to his work that afternoon. A few minutes before time for the bank to close a boy came hurrying in. He marched up to the cashier's window.

"Mr. Steele," he said, "a lady sent this letter to you."

Perry took the letter from the boy's hand. "A lady?" he interrogated.

"Yes, she's at the hotel. She came in on the train this afternoon."

"All right, Jimmy," Perry said as he gave the boy a coin. He felt himself turn cold. He was glad that none of the other employees of the bank were near enough to see that his face had become pale. He would not trust himself to open the letter in this public place, so he put it in his pocket, and went on with his work until time to close.

Then he hurried home and went to his room. With trembling hands he hastily tore open the envelop and read:

"My dear Mr. Steele:

"I am at the hotel, and would like to see you as soon as banking hours are over this afternoon.

"Gertie Green"

He sat and stared at the letter several minutes. Was this an invitation or a demand, an entreaty or a threat? She had written as if she expected him to obey her summons. Suppose he should ignore it, what then? She might file suit against him. That would be an awful disgrace to him. Even if he should win in his defense, or succeed in having the case dismissed or thrown out of court, the whole miserable story would become public, and he would have to leave the country. If the exposure should come before his marriage there would be no wedding. Anna would quit him, and he would be fired from the bank in disgrace. If it should come afterward, it would ruin and break up his home.

He would have to go voluntarily and make some kind of compromise with Miss Green, and he'd have to be quick about it, too. Anna Barton's train would be due in two hours. If he should ignore the summons by the school-teacher and fail to see her at the hotel, she might set out to hunt him up. What an embarrassing position he would be in if she should confront him just as he was greeting Anna Barton; or at the door of her home just as he was arriving there with Anna and her friends; or even if she should come to see him at his home or at the bank.

He stole out of the house, slipped over to a side street, and hurried to the hotel as quickly as possible.

Fortunately there was no one in the lobby except Mr. Harrison, the clerk. After passing the time of day with that individual he casually glanced over the register. Yes, Gertie Green's name was there.

"Mr. Harrison, I wish to speak with this lady," he said as he pointed to the name. "Will you please send my card up to her?"

"Certainly," the clerk answered. "Just wait here a minute."

In a few minutes Mr. Harrison returned. "Mr. Steele," he said, "the lady asks you to come to the parlor on the second floor."

Perry hesitated a minute. "Mr. Harrison, this is to be a consultation on private business, and I shall appreciate the favor very much if you will see that we are not disturbed."

"Certainly, Mr. Steele. I'll see that no one bothers you."

Perry thanked the clerk and went upstairs. As he stepped through the door into the parlor he saw Gertie Green standing by the side of a rocking-chair on the opposite side of the room. Her face was very pale, and her eyes were wide with—was it fear? She looked as if she were uncertain as to what kind of a reception she was going to get.

Perry closed the door and took a step or two in her direction.

"Well, you see I'm here!" was his greeting.

"Yes." The word was barely audible. For a minute she clung to the back of the chair for support. Then she let herself down into the seat.

"Have you anyone concealed around here as a witness?" he demanded to know.

She did not deign to answer the question, spoken as it was with discourteous gruffness.

"Will you have a chair, Mr. Steele?"

He slumped wearily into the seat toward which she pointed and waited to hear what she had to say. Her face was white. She looked haggard and thin. Perry began to realize that she, too, had been suffering.

"Are you sick, Mr. Steele?" she asked.

"Yes, I have a severe headache."

"I'm sorry."

"What is it you have to say to me, Miss Green?"

She sat looking at the floor for a minute or more. Then slowly she raised her eyes and looked at him.

"Mr. Steele, I'm in trouble!"

Perry started. "O Lord!" he groaned.

He arose from his chair and walked to the window and stared out with unseeing eyes. "O Lord!" he repeated miserably. "Not that!"

Presently he came back to his chair.

"Miss Green," he scolded, "why in the name of all that's decent didn't you make me keep my place when we went driving together? Knowing what a tragedy a misstep would be to you, you ought to have had sense enough to freeze up when I began to get too familiar with you! The right kind of a girl would have done that, and we would have kept on safe ground."

She looked at him a minute as if she were too badly exasperated at him to speak. Then she retorted, "If you had behaved yourself as the right kind of young man would have behaved I wouldn't

have had to freeze up in order to keep on safe ground!"

"Well," he stubbornly persisted, "I had no intention to go wrong, but your yielding to my advances made me see that I could go farther if I would, and when a man sees that, he is as good as gone. You should have called me down at the very first sign of danger."

"Yes, I know I should. But that admonition from you comes a little late, doesn't it? Why didn't you so advise me right at the time you saw that I was in danger of giving way to your persuasion? It was then that I needed that advice—not now. Let me remind you of the fact that when your greatest great-grandfather tried to shift the blame for a misdeed to my greatest great-grandmother by saying, 'The woman did tempt me,' his excuse was counted as too thin to keep him from being turned out of paradise with his partner in sin. Now, Mr. Steele, we might just as well make up our mind right now that our blaming each other isn't going to get us out of this scrape."

"No, I suppose not." He slumped back gloomily into his chair. "Does anybody else know about this?"

"Not a soul but the doctor whom I consulted."

"Are you absolutely sure that I'm the only one to whom this could be laid?"

She looked at him indignantly. "That was very unkind of you, Mr. Steele. You are adding insult to injury. Yes, I'm absolutely sure."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then she began to speak in a low tone. "I must resign my

school next week, before anyone suspects anything. I'll have to go away where I'm not known."

"Have you told anyone else about your intention to go away?"

"No, I'll just quietly disappear. No one will know where or why."

"You—you're not thinking of—self-destruction, are you?"

"No, indeed I'm not! I've already committed one great sin, and I don't purpose to make things worse by committing another one. I'll soon have someone to live for, and I owe it to that someone to live a better life than I have ever lived before."

He sat staring at the wall on the opposite side of the room, but he said nothing.

"I didn't send for you to reproach you, Mr. Steele, or to threaten you. Understand at the beginning of this consultation that I have no intention to go into court or to take any steps that will publish to the world the mistake we made."

Perry could not prevent a look of relief from showing in his face.

"However, I do expect you to do something toward bearing the burden which our indiscretion has placed on me, not because you are compelled to do so, but because you see that you ought to do so. The fact is, I lost every cent of my money in the bank failure in our town—all that I had saved from my wages as teacher. I have only one month's wages to go away on. I don't want to become a charity patient in the poor-house; neither do you want your son or daughter to be born in a poor-house."

"Good land!" he gasped as he glanced furtively

around to make sure that no one had heard what she said about his son or daughter. "Good land! Be careful what you say! Of course I'll help you, Gertie. I'll draw some money out of the bank for you as soon as it opens in the morning, and I'll furnish you more from time to time as you need it. I'll see to it that you don't go to the poor-house."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes and began to cry softly to herself.

Perry arose from his chair and stood staring at the floor. Then he walked to the window again, and stood there, looking out but seeing nothing. By and by he came back to his chair.

"Miss Green, you—you broke your engagement with Dunn?"

"Yes, of course. I couldn't think of holding him to his engagement after—after that night you and I went astray. Not long after that unfortunate affair I wrote him a letter releasing him from the engagement."

"What reason did you give him for breaking with him?"

"I couldn't tell him the real reason, of course. I don't want him ever to know. I couldn't tell him that I felt as if I had become like cheap, damaged goods in a store, unfit to be worked off onto a good customer. I asked to be released and left him to draw his own conclusion. He thinks that I was fickle, and had ceased to care for him. I just let it go at that."

"And his farm? He owns that still?"

"Yes. He's building a house there."

"He told me about the home he intended to build.

He seemed to take a great deal of pride in it."

"Yes, he called it our Garden of Eden." Then she added bitterly, "It is to be somebody else's Garden of Eden now."

"And I'm to blame for it!" Perry groaned.

He arose from his chair, walked across the room, and stood gazing absently at a picture hanging on the wall. After a few minutes he said without turning around, "We didn't count the cost."

"The cost will have to be paid, all the same," she replied chokingly, "and I'll have the most of it to pay."

Was that true? he asked himself. What was the price she must pay? Her reputation, the love of her large circle of friends and acquaintances, her engagement to the man she loved, her chances to go on with her chosen work of teaching, notwithstanding she had spent years in preparing to do that kind of work. What was there ahead of her but shame and disgrace? And was he, who was more to blame than was she, to get off with merely doling out a little money to her?

He turned around and came back to the chair. "Gertie, I'm sorry for the wrong I did you."

She took her handkerchief down from her eyes and looked straight at him. "How sorry?" she asked.

He was taken aback. "Why," he stammered, "sorry enough to keep me from ever getting into any such a scrape again."

"That doesn't dispose of the one we're already in, does it?"

"No—o," he admitted miserably.

"And it won't give your child a name or a father's care."

He stared at the floor, and groaned within himself.

"My fiancee is due to come in on this evening's train," he said; "it's about due now. But I—ah—can't go to meet her now."

"I suppose not. Notwithstanding the fact that you yielded to temptation once, you are really too good a man to become a bigamist."

"A what?"

" 'Bigamist' was the word used."

"Is that a threat, Miss Green?"

"No, Mr. Steele, it is not. I expect you to do right, simply because you want to do right, and not because you are threatened with punishment in case you fall short of doing right. Rest assured that, whatever you do, I have no intention to tell on you."

He stared at nothing in particular for a while before he remarked, "Gertie, I—want—to—do—what—is—right."

"I know you do."

"Maybe—maybe—I ought to ask you to marry me."

She did not answer immediately. Presently she raised her eyes to his and said sadly, "O Perry, if we had only kept the narrow path," her voice broke and her throat ached with unutterable regret, "you might have proposed to me sooner or later, not because you felt it your duty to do so, but because you really desired to have me as your wife. You might have been proud of me, instead of being ashamed of me."

"Gertie, do you think it would be possible for me,

by living a clean, upright Christian life henceforth, to regain the high place I once held in your mind and heart?"

She gazed out of the window a few minutes. "I don't know exactly how to answer your question. I'll try to be absolutely truthful. You held a very high place in my estimation the first time or two I saw you."

"I know I did," he said humbly, "or you wouldn't have accepted my invitation to go riding."

"If you had lived true to your ideals, you could have become—oh, what couldn't you have become to me? But—"

"I understand. I disappointed you. I disappointed myself, too."

"Yes, you disappointed me, and fell from the heights where I had placed you—the heights where you really belonged and where you ought to have stayed. As to whether you could ever regain that high place—well, you might be able to do that to a certain extent, perhaps. But I wonder whether you can ever gain the place you might have occupied if you had kept straight. On the other hand, I know well enough that I disappointed you, and I fell in your estimation, and I can never be in your eyes what I might have been if I had lived true to my ideals. We wouldn't be honest with ourselves or with each other if we didn't face this truth fairly and squarely. And yet neither of us meant to go wrong; we simply trusted ourselves too far."

He heard a train whistle. It was the train on which Anna Barton and the tourist party were coming. He knew that a number of his friends would

be at the station to meet the returned travelers, and they would all be surprized to see that he was not there with them.

He wondered what excuse he could make for failing to be there. But he didn't want to see Anna—or anybody else—that evening.

"Gertie," he said as he arose from the chair, "let's think over the situation tonight. I'll see you early in the morning, and we'll then decide what is best to do."

She arose and gave him her hand. "Very well, Perry. I trust you. I'm sure you want to do right."

CHAPTER 28

A RESTLESS NIGHT

As Perry came out of the hotel he hailed a taxicab, for by this time his head was aching so severely that he felt too sick to walk home.

"Take me home," he ordered the driver as he climbed in.

What excuse could he make for failing to meet Anna at the station? To be sure he had a headache, but that had not prevented his going to the hotel to consult with a lady; if he was able to do that it would look strange that he did not feel able to go to the station to meet Anna.

Well, he had an excuse for not meeting her, anyhow. He really was sick, and that would serve as an excuse for not going to Barton's that evening. He didn't want to see Anna yet; he was too much at sea as to what he was going to do to feel like talking with her this evening and discussing their plans for the future—especially so since he had had that interview with Miss Green. He must have the evening to himself to study it over.

He hurried up to his room, undressed, and went to bed. His mother, hearing him as he went upstairs, followed him up to his room.

"Why, Perry," she exclaimed in alarm when she saw him in bed; "are you sick?"

"Yes, I've had a fearful headache all afternoon."

She came to his bedside and smoothed back the hair from his forehead. "Why, you have fever. Hadn't I better phone for a doctor?"

"No! I don't want a doctor. All I need is rest and quiet for this evening and tonight."

She brought a basin of water to the bedside and bathed his face and hands.

"Mother, will you phone to Bartons' and tell them about my being sick? I suppose that Anna came in on the train this evening and Bartons will wonder why I was not at the station as one of Anna's friends to welcome her home. Tell them that I don't feel able to go over to see her this evening."

Mrs. Steele went downstairs to the telephone. In a short time she returned. "I told them that you were sick," she said. "They were sorry to hear that, and Anna is coming over to see you right away."

Perry suppressed a groan. He didn't want to see anybody, not even Anna Barton. He wanted to be by himself this evening. He wanted time to think over the interview he had had with Gertie Green before he tried to talk with Anna.

In a few minutes he heard an automobile drive up in front and stop. A minute later he heard someone greeting Mrs. Steele at the door. He raised up on his elbow and listened intently. It was Anna Barton.

He dropped back weakly on his pillow. What could he say to her! He couldn't receive her as tho he expected as a matter of course that their wedding would come off right away as they had planned; neither could he spoil the happiness of her

homecoming by frankly telling her that he was under obligations to marry another girl!

He heard his mother telling the caller that he had a very severe headache and seemed to have some fever, too, but no doubt he would be delighted to see her.

The two came upstairs to his room.

Anna paused at the door a minute, then she came swiftly to his bedside and stooped and kissed him.

"Perry," she said tenderly, "I'm sorry to see you sick."

"I'm not very sick," he assured her; "or, at least, I'll be all right soon."

"I hope so."

"You look well, Anna."

Look well! She looked lovelier and more adorable than ever before. Now that she stood before him he felt that he couldn't give her up. He just couldn't do it.

"Yes, I feel well, too. Oh, we had a wonderful trip, and I have so much to tell you. You must get well right away so that you can make a good listener."

"Just looking at you and hearing you talk is helping me," he said. As his eyes feasted on her loveliness, and he thought about how much she was to him and what a priceless privilege it would be to have her near him always as a companion and helper, the idea of giving her up in order to be just to a girl who had made herself cheap by yielding to persuasion to go wrong seemed wholly out of the question. He could help Gertie Green financially; that would be all.

"Perry, where is Don?" Anna asked.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him today."

"We've inquired, but no one seems to know where he is. I don't wonder at his being out of town, however, after Julia's treating him as she did. I feel so sorry for Don."

"Why do you feel sorry for him?"

"Why, hasn't he told you what Julia wrote to him?"

"Yes, he told me that she had turned him down. I don't think he's going to let that kill him. If you are going to feel sorry for either of them, you'd better feel sorry for her."

"Maybe you're right."

"Did Julia and Dunkirk get married?"

"Yes. They went to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. They expect to come home next week. Well, I have much to tell you, Perry, but you are in no condition to visit and talk tonight. So I'll go home now and will see you tomorrow."

"I suppose I'll feel more like talking tomorrow."

The visitor departed.

Perry had a restless night. Hour after hour he lay awake, thinking. He reviewed over and over again the many happy evenings that he and Anna Barton had spent together before she went away on her trip, talking, singing, reading, and planning their new home. She had always been a beautiful girl, but this evening when she paused at the door a minute as she came into his room she seemed a perfect vision of loveliness. Never before had she seemed so desirable to him.

And he reviewed over and over again his vacation

trip to the Ozarks country, especially everything that had happened in connection with the affair with Gertie Green. Why, oh why, had he forgotten Anna Barton and his love for her, even for that short time? He recalled the first time he ever saw Gertie—the afternoon he overtook her just as she was walking home from school, and invited her to ride with him. There was nothing wrong in that. He remembered just how she looked and what she said on that occasion. And his visit to the schoolhouse the next afternoon, and the drive home afterward. What an interesting, attractive girl she had proved herself to be on that occasion. Nothing had been said or done that afternoon by either of them that was the least bit unbecoming to a perfect lady or gentleman. It was a happy afternoon, and the memory of it would have been pleasant if it had not been associated in his mind with the memory of what occurred afterward. He recalled the drive the next evening—the evening when he and the schoolma'am began to skate out *on thin ice;* and a few nights later—when they broke through the ice. Oh, why had he trusted himself so far when there was so much at stake; his happiness, home, position, good name, the girl he loved, and his religious faith!

If he had only been what he should have been, if he had only been a safe associate for a sweet, innocent girl, Gertie Green would still have been holding her head up like a queen among girls instead of being cast down, filled with shame, and anxious to flee into hiding somewhere where no one lived who had ever seen or heard of her. He felt that if he had been big and strong he would have sought, not to

persuade her to yield, but to protect her, if need be, even against her own weakness; altho that would not have been necessary in this case, for it had only been through his coaxing, and honeying, and breaking down her defenses that she had been induced to give up to him. Instead of being a protector of virtue he had been its besieger.

And as a result of his sin this girl, who was so popular in her neighborhood, so admired and loved by her many friends, and so highly esteemed by everybody, who was so admirably fitted to be the queen in a good home and a leader in society—this girl could see nothing ahead of her but disgrace and ruin—she would become an outcast; her friends would shun her; she would not be allowed to teach school in order to make her living, and she had been forced to give up the man to whom she was engaged to be married.

He slipped out of bed and kneeled on the floor and tried to pray for forgiveness for doing her such an irreparable wrong; but he just couldn't make that prayer in faith. "O Lord," he prayed, "instead of following your directions and keeping in the path of peace and safety, I followed the inclinations of the natural man, and I've got myself and others into a hell on earth." If Perry had never believed in hell before, he did now, for he was in it.

"What ought I to do now? Reveal to me what I ought to do, and I'll—"

He balked at that. He had started to vow that he would do whatever the Lord showed him to be the right thing to do. But he couldn't bring himself to make that vow without making mental reservations.

He already knew what he ought to do, even before he breathed that agonizing prayer. Ask for Divine guidance? Why the pillar of cloud and of fire never directed the Israelites in a more unmistakably plain manner as to where and when they should move than his sense of right showed him which way he ought to go. He knew that he owed it to Gertie Green to marry her and care for her.

He went back to bed, but not to sleep. What should he do? Of course he must do something to help Gertie financially until she could support herself again. He had a thousand dollars on deposit in the bank. If he should draw out a part of it in the morning and give it to her, and promise to send her more as she needed it, and asked her to go away, he felt sure that she would heed his request. She would make no threats of exposure, and none of his friends would know that she had been to see him. He would then be left free to marry Anna Barton, and to move with her into his new house, and to keep his place in the bank and his standing in the community.

Hm-m, maybe he would!

But Perry knew that Gertie Green felt that she had a right to expect him to do better by her than merely to give her some money and send her away; and she would be disappointed in him if he failed to do what he and she both knew he ought to do. Moreover, was an innocent child to be deprived of a father's name and protection?

He could not put out of his mind what she had said about his being too good a man to become a bigamist. Why, she had no right to insinuate that she

was his wife! Of course not! No ceremony had ever been performed. No—o, no ceremony, but—

And yet there was Anna Barton to be considered. How would she feel if he should throw her over without a word of explanation, and flee to parts unknown with another girl. She would be crushed. After all she was the girl he loved; he was in love with her long before he ever knew that there was a girl by the name of Gertie Green in existence. He couldn't give Anna up! Why, he never would get over sorrowing for what might have been. Then he felt anger flare up in his heart against Miss Green. It was through her failure to behave as she should have behaved that he had got into this trouble. Anna had kept straight; was he to throw her over for a girl who had fallen into sin?

Once more he tried to pray. "O Lord, what ought I to do? Show me what I ought to do, and I'll—"

Again he stopped at this point.

Could it be, he asked himself, that his religious faith and consecration had become so unresurrectably dead that he couldn't, or wouldn't, ask for Divine guidance without making a mental reservation as to what he must or must not be directed to do?

"Show me what I ought to do," he prayed again; and after a minute's hesitation he resolutely finished the prayer, "and I'll do it."

Well, he felt a little easier. He didn't know what he was going to do, but somehow he felt that events would shape themselves so that whatever he did do, that would be the right thing to do.

He secretly hoped that he would be shown that it would be all right to—

But hold! He had asked for directions, and not for confirmation of his own secret wishes!

His house was all ready to move into—in case he and Anna should get married as they had planned to do. Anna's friends were going to give her a shower tomorrow night. Then the wedding would take place one night next week, and after that they would be "at home" to their friends in their new home.

Of course he would see Gertie Green in the morning and give her some money—he would be liberal with her, and would assure her that she should be well taken care of. She would then go quietly away and no one would know.

Unconsciously in his planning he was assuming that the secret wish that was already in his heart was to be revealed to be the leading of the Lord.

But—he stopped his planning a minute to consider—suppose, just suppose that he was not shown that it was the thing for him to do to go on with his wedding plans. He began to think over what he should do in case he should become convinced that the right thing to do would be to marry Gertie Green. He could pack most of his clothes in his suitcases and grip and secretly put them into his automobile early in the morning, and drive to the hotel and get Gertie, and together they could drive over to her home and be married at once. Then they could start for the West the next morning—go into some new town away out West where no one would know either of them and start life anew. He would

not even have a letter of recommendation to help him to get a job, and he might have to take a job as a railroad section hand for a while. Nevertheless they would have to make the best of it. Of course the elopement—for that is what it would amount to—on the very eve of the time set for his marriage to Anna Barton, would create a sensation, and would turn all his friends against him.

He got out of bed and carefully went over his wardrobe, and packed his suitcase and grip full of clothing to take with him in the morning in case he should decide to go.

He went back to bed, but was too restless to sleep. By and by he got up and dressed, and noiselessly carried his suitcase and grip out to the garage, and stowed them in the automobile; so that, if he should decide to go in the morning, he could walk out to the automobile as usual and start away just as if nothing unusual was on his mind.

If he should decide not to go it would be easy to bring the suitcase and grip back to his room.

As he was slipping up the stairway he heard the telephone bell ring downstairs. No one else in the house was awake, so he tiptoed his way down to answer the call. Who in the world could be calling at this time of night, and what could be wanted?

He took down the receiver. "Hello!" he called.

"Hello!" came back the answer; "this you, Perry?"

It was Don's voice!

"Yes. Where under the sun have you been today, Don?"

"I just now got back from a trip to old Missouri.

I have some news for you, and just couldn't go to bed until I called you up to tell you about it."

"Well, what is it?"

"There's someone else here. See if you recognize that someone's voice."

Perry heard Don call out to somebody, "Here, you talk to him. See if he knows who you are."

"Hello, Mr. Steele!"

Perry nearly dropped the receiver. "For the land's sake!" he gasped. "It's Mary Norton!"

"Used to be. But it's Mary Rankin now," came the laughing response.

Perry was too badly astonished to make any reply.

He heard her say, "Here, Don, you take the phone, now."

"Hello, Perry!" It was Don who was speaking now. "Did the tourists return today?"

"Yes."

"Anybody wondering where I was?"

"Yes. No one seemed to have any idea what had become of you."

"Did they think I had run off broken-hearted?"

"I think some of them were feeling sorry for you. I'm not. I'm congratulating you. I think you have a treasure."

"I know I have."

"Where are you now?"

"In our new home. It's not only furnished now, phone and all, but it's occupied."

"Good."

"Well, I'll see you in the morning, Perry, and—"

"Maybe you will, Don. But if something happens

that you don't understand you won't go back on me, will you, Don?"

"I'll not go back on you, of course I'll not. But you are talking riddles."

"Suppose you should get a letter from me asking you to act as my agent in selling my house—"

"Perry, are you awake, or are you having a nightmare?"

"Maybe I am, Don. Maybe I'll see you personally, instead of writing to you, and maybe I'll tell you to forget what I said while I was in this nightmare. But I do wish that I could waken up in the morning and find out that all of the summer's happenings have just been a bad dream."

"Perry, are you sick? If you are, I'll go right over there to see—"

"No, I'm not sick now, Don. I was a while ago. I'm going to bed now. With all my heart I wish you and the beautiful strawberry girl of the Ozarks joy and happiness and everything good. And I congratulate you because you stayed true to your religion. You didn't commit spiritual suicide. You didn't make yourself common or cheap."

Before the astonished Don could ask what in the world he had meant by that, Perry had hung up.

When Perry went back to bed he began to worry over the situation again. He did not know what he was going to do.

All at once he stopped. "Look here," he said to himself. "It's time for me to get hold of myself! I'm acting like a weakling. It's high time for me to quit trying to fool myself into believing that I don't know what I ought to do, for I do know. If I

had lived up to what I knew to be right I never would have got into this trouble in the first place; in fact, I would have shied away from the possibility of getting into it. I can never get out of the trouble by continuing to go against my convictions. I've got to face the consequences of my sin sooner or later; I may as well face them like a man. I must go straight to Anna Barton and tell her the truth. I must let her know that I have forfeited my right to marry her and have placed myself under obligations to marry another girl. Anna may faint, or go into hysterics, but I'll have to do it all the same. And I'll have to tell my mother, too."

When he came to this decision he felt relieved to a certain extent. But even as he was planning to carry out this resolution another thought came into his mind. "No—o, that wouldn't do, for it would make them think that Gertie Green is a bad woman. Even if I should tell them that it was through my leading and persuasion that she and I went into by- and forbidden paths, and that it was in spite of her protests, they would believe that I was generously trying to shield her by taking more than my share of the blame. No, I cannot tell them that the reason I have decided to marry Gertie is the fact that she was a copartner with me in sin. And yet if I decline to explain at all they will suppose that I got tired of Anna and turned to another girl and will despise me for my fickleness and inconstancy. Well, in order to shield Gertie, I'll just have to let them think that."

Well, if he was going away in the morning he must get busy at once arranging his affairs. He

wrote a letter resigning his position in the bank. And he wrote instructions to Don, asking him to attend to some business matters for him, including the selling of his new house.

Then he tried to write a letter to Anna Barton.

"Dear Anna," he began. Then he stopped and studied a long time trying to think of some way to break the unpleasant news to her. He wrote and tore up one letter after another. Everything that he could put down on paper seemed to be other than what he wanted to say—altho he hardly knew what he did wish to say. Finally he wrote a brief, blunt note releasing Anna from her engagement to marry him and giving as a reason for asking for his freedom the fact that he had taken a liking to another girl. He knew that Anna and everybody else would soon know that he had gone off with another girl anyhow, and he might as well tell her so beforehand.

Very early in the morning he called Don over the telephone and asked him to come to his room at once.

In a few minutes the latter came hurrying over. No one happened to be in the front part of the house when he arrived, and he opened the door and went quietly up to Perry's room, just as he had done many a time before that, without anyone else knowing that he was there.

"What on earth is the matter with you, old boy?" the caller exclaimed as he bounced into the room.

Perry pushed away the letter he had been writing and turned to face the visitor. He looked so haggard that Don, shocked and alarmed, quickly came to his side.

"Perry, what's wrong? Are you sick?"

Perry pointed to a chair close by. "Have a seat, Don."

"But what's wrong?"

"If you'll give me a chance, I'm going to tell you. But you're the only soul on earth I am going to tell; and what I say to you is never, never to be revealed to anyone else."

He toyed with his pen a minute, and gazed absently out through the window while his friend waited impatiently to hear what he had on his mind.

"It is in order to shield someone else that I enjoin secrecy. As for myself it doesn't matter; my good name and reputation in this community will be gone anyhow as soon as people find out that I have run away."

"What on earth do you mean?" the astonished Don demanded to know.

"Don, I sold out to the devil a few months ago, and he is foreclosing the mortgage now."

Don stared at him a minute, then he put a hand on his shoulder. "Perry," his voice betrayed a good deal of anxiety as he spoke, "let me help you over to the bed. You'd better lie down and rest. And we'll phone for a doctor to drop in to see you."

"No, Don, I'm not delirious. Get that thought out of your mind right now. I'm more nearly sane this morning than I've been for months. Take that chair and give me a chance to tell you what's on my mind."

The caller went back to his chair, but he showed that he was still uneasy about Perry's condition.

"It's hard to tell you, Don."

"Suppose you just put off telling me until you feel better. Lie down and take a good long sleep. I'll sit by your bed."

"No, I must tell you now, for I'm going away."

"Going away? You mean for the whole day?"

"No, I don't mean that. I'm going away to stay."

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not joking."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know where, but I know I'm going. Now, just keep still there and let me say what I have to say to you. Don, I—I—when you and I were out on our vacation trip, I—you know that I became acquainted with a school-teacher named Gertie Green."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well—"

A long pause.

"Well—I've got to marry her."

Don sat up straight. "What do you mean!" he thundered.

"Hush-sh! Don't talk so loud. They'll hear you downstairs. I mean that I allowed the tempter to get the upper hand of me, and I persuaded her to—to go wrong. She is in trouble, and I have to marry her."

Don glared at his friend as if he could not believe that he had heard aright. "You—you mean to say that you—you did that?"

Perry bowed his head affirmatively.

"I can't believe it! I can't believe that you'd be such a blamed fool, when you had so much at stake!"

"I wish I couldn't believe it," Perry groaned. "I wish that I could wake and see that it has only been a bad dream, and that I was still free to keep my home, my friends, my good name, my position in the bank, and my chances of rapid promotion and success, and above all the girl I love best. But it isn't a dream, Don."

"Do you really mean that you've got yourself into a place where you have to marry that girl, and give up Anna Barton?"

"Yes."

"When is the wedding to take place?"

"Today, I suppose."

"Well, you certainly have played the fool!" Don stormed, trying to subdue his tones so that he would not be heard downstairs. "To think that you, with all the light you have, and with all your religious profession—to think that you should get yourself into such a scrape as that!"

Perry recoiled as if he had been struck, but Don went on mercilessly, and the more he scolded the more indignant he became. "You disobeyed one of the most positive 'thou-shalt-not's' in the Bible and went right square against what you knew to be right! You've got yourself into a nice predicament now, haven't you? Why—in—the—world—didn't you count the cost?"

"Well, Don, you yourself were captivated by a girl while we were on that trip."

"Yes, I admit that, but as soon as I discovered that I was coming to care for her I reminded myself that I was engaged to someone else and I kept away from her; and I kept on keeping away from

her until Julia broke her engagement with me and I had a right to woo Mary in an honorable way. But you—look what you've done! You've got yourself into a scrape that will not only ruin your own life, but it will crush Anna Barton and humiliate all your friends, to say nothing about your dragging a respectable girl down into the mire. Why, I can't believe it!"

Perry flung his arms on the table and hid his face in his arms.

"You made a nice little talk to the young people about living up to the prayer to be led away from temptation," Don scolded, "and then you deliberately fooled with temptation until it got you down! Why in the name of common sense didn't you stop to consider what the harvest would be? Here Anna Barton has come back—the best girl that ever was—and you've lost your right to marry her; you've lost your job, your prospects for brilliant business success, and the respect and esteem of all your friends. You—"

"Don, spare me! Don't strike a man when he's down. I know too well what my sin is going to cost me—and others. I know it better than you do, for I've lain awake nights worrying over it."

For a minute Don stood looking at his stricken friend in silence. Then his denunciatory mood was supplanted by one of pity. It dawned on him that Perry's burden would be heavy enough without any additional condemnation from him.

"Forgive me, Perry. I've been too severe. It isn't mine to punish or condemn. I don't want to add a feather's-weight to your burden. I'd like to

lighten it if I could, even by bearing a part of it myself."

"I know you would, Don, but you can't. I'll have to drink the cup myself. No one else can do it for me."

"Perry, has this girl been to see you?"

"She is at the hotel now."

"Has she threatened to expose you if you attempt to go on with your marriage to Anna Barton?"

"No."

"Why not give her money enough to keep her and promise to send her more as she needs it, and send her away?"

"The 'pillar of cloud' didn't move that way, Don."

"The 'pillar of cloud'?"

"Yes. When I asked for Divine guidance the sense of right and duty didn't lead to sending her away."

"Pity is that you didn't look to see which way that 'pillar of cloud'—your sense of right—was leading at the time you went wrong!"

"Yes, it's a pity," Perry agreed wearily. "All the more reason why I should strive all the harder to heed its leadings now."

"Anna doesn't know yet, does she?"

"No, I'm going to let her know this morning."

"Going to call on her and tell her in person?"

"No—o, I can't do that. If I should go there, she'd run to meet me as cordially as ever, and I'd have to repel her in order to break such news to her. I have written her a letter releasing her from her engagement. I'll send the letter to her this morning."

"What excuse do you give for breaking with her?"

"There's no good excuse that I can make, is there? I simply released her from her engagement, and told her that I had taken a liking to another girl."

"Everybody will turn against you for that."

"I know they will. People will think that I fell in love with someone else and didn't have the honesty to tell Anna until the last minute. But I want to shield Gertie from censure as much as I can. If in the future I ever succeed in living down the disgrace and public censure for runing away just before the day set for my wedding, so that I can venture back here for a visit, I want my friends to respect my wife, and to treat her well, no matter what they think of me."

Don was silent for a minute. "Well, Perry, while you showed weakness when you fell, you are certainly showing a good deal of strength and resolution in trying to rectify your mistake. I don't know whether I would have the grace to do the right thing under the circumstances. Can I do anything to help you?"

"I should like to have you sell my house for me, and send me the money. I'll need it. As soon as I get settled somewhere I'll write you my address."

"Yes. What else?"

"I have a thousand dollars in the bank. I've written a check," here he handed Don a bank-check, "and I'd like for you to go to the bank this morning and draw the money and bring it to me. I haven't the courage to face the fellows in the bank and have them congratulate me on Anna's return, as I know

they would do if they should see me this morning. And here is my letter of resignation as cashier of the bank. Please hand it to Mr. Barton. I simply can't face him this morning."

Don put on his hat and arose to go. "All right, Perry. I'll be here with the money soon."

He went quietly down the stairs and out by the front door. Mrs. Steele, who was working back in the kitchen, did not hear him leave, and did not know that he had been there at all.

A short time before that Mrs. Steele had listened at Perry's door to find out whether he was awake, and hearing no sound from within—Perry was writing a letter at the time—she supposed that he was asleep. She felt sure that he had had a restless night, and she made up her mind not to awaken him to go to his work, and not to allow anyone else to disturb him. She telephoned to the bank that he was sick and would not be there that forenoon.

A little later the telephone bell rang. When she answered it she heard a woman's voice ask, "Is this the home of Perry Steele?"

"Yes," she replied.

"May I speak to him?" the woman asked.

"He is asleep now. He was sick last night, and did not rest well, and I do not wish to disturb him. Do you wish to leave a message for him?"

"No—o, but I—do you think he will awaken soon?"

"Yes, I suppose he will."

"I had an appointment to meet him early this morning, and I have to go away on the noon train."

"He will surely be awake by that time."

"If he is sick he may not feel like venturing out this forenoon, so I'll just go out to his house a few minutes. For I simply must see him before I go away."

And before Mrs. Steele could answer, the receiver at the other end of the line had hung up.

Before long a taxi drove up, and a young woman got out and came to the door.

Mrs. Steele met her at the door. "I suppose you are the party who was inquiring over the phone in regard to Perry, are you?"

"Yes," the young lady answered.

"Just come in and take a seat."

The caller accepted the invitation. "You need not awaken him. I'll wait—unless he fails to awaken in time for me to catch that train."

"Very well. If he doesn't awaken by that time, I'll call him."

"Thank you."

Another knock was heard at the door. Mrs. Steele answered it.

"Why Anna Barton, it's you, is it? Come in."

"Yes, it's I," the newcomer answered. "I was uneasy about Perry, and just ran over a minute to see how he is this morning."

"He is asleep yet," Mrs. Steele said. "I think he had a restless night, and I haven't allowed him to be disturbed this morning. Come in, Anna."

The caller accepted the invitation, and came into the room. She was laughing and as happy as could be. She stopped short when she saw the stranger sitting there.

Mrs. Steele could not introduce the two visitors

because she did not know the name of the stranger.

The face of the latter had become very white when she heard Perry's mother call the newcomer by name.

Perry had just finished the letter he was writing when he heard the noise of someone talking downstairs. He quietly opened the door a little in order to learn who was down there. He recognized Anna Barton's voice. He stopped aghast. He couldn't go down there and have her run to greet him happy and smiling and sternly repel her and tell her that he was not going to marry her.

On the other hand it wouldn't do at all to greet her cheerfully just as if all were well, knowing that within an hour he would send her that letter breaking the engagement. To see her and talk with her this morning, even to have only a few minutes' friendly chat with her, would make it very hard for him to let her know that he was going to leave her and marry another girl.

But—well, if he had it to do, he could, and would. There was no getting around it.

He washed and put on a clean shirt and collar, and carefully brushed his clothes. While he was giving his shoes a final rub he heard his mother ask the question, "You don't live here, do you?"

He paused to listen. Evidently there was someone besides Anna down there.

"No, I live in Missouri," was the reply.

He stood as if frozen in his tracks. He had recognized Gertie Green's voice. Gertie and Anna were both waiting in the living-room to see him.

He looked wildly about for a way to escape. The

windows were too far from the ground for him to jump out of them. Besides, to escape in that way would only make matters worse.

He dropped weakly into a chair. He must have a few minutes to think and decide what to do. No, he wouldn't attempt to run away. He might just as well face the music first as last. If he went away with Gertie Green, everybody, including Anna and his mother, would soon know about it anyhow; there was no need for him to bring upon himself, as an additional cause for being censured, the charge that he was too cowardly to tell his mother and fiancee that he was going.

He heard someone step on the front porch and come into the entry hall. Instead of going through the door into the living-room the newcomer was coming stealthily up the stairs. It must be Don returning.

Yes, it was he. Don came into the room and noiselessly closed the door behind him.

He handed Perry a roll of bills. "There's the money. A thousand dollars."

Perry divided the money into four packages. One of these packages he put in his grip; the second he put in a pocket of a coat which he packed in his suit-case. The third he put in his pocket-book. Then he took off a shoe and stocking and stowed the fourth package inside the stocking and replaced it and the shoe on his foot.

"Now, if I'm held up, the bandits will get only one-fourth of my roll," he said. "Did you give my letter to Mr. Barton?"

"No, he wasn't in the bank. I'll see that he gets it sometime this forenoon."

Perry sat there in gloomy silence for a time. Then he said bitterly, "Don, sometime when you hear someone tell the young people's society that it is hard to walk in the narrow way, tell them, oh, tell them that walking out on the broad way is harder. It isn't as hard to be good as it is to be bad."

"Who is downstairs?" Don asked. "I hear someone talking?"

"Gertie Green and Anna Barton."

"What? Both of them? Well, you are in a fix sure enough! What in the world are you going to do?"

Perry shook his head, indicating that he didn't know what to do.

"You might tell Anna that the other lady wants you to look after some business for her, and that you will have to go with her for a short time. You could ask Anna to excuse you for a short time. That would give you a chance to make your get-away."

"Don, there's enough charged against my account without my adding anything to it. I'm not going to deceive even to spare myself a lot of embarrassment. I've turned a new leaf, I tell you."

Don shrugged his shoulders. "Then *you* think of some way out of the predicament you're in."

Perry picked up his suit-case. "There isn't any way out. I've got to face the music. Bring that grip."

He took one last homesick look at his room, then he opened the door and went out into the hall at the head of the stairs. Just as he was starting to go down the steps he heard Anna's voice asking icily,

"You say you are from Missouri? Did you happen to be teaching school near the place where Perry camped while he was on his vacation trip?"

Perry stopped, almost paralyzed. Anna seemed to know about his having met a teacher on that trip! Oh, yes, he remembered now. Don, in one of his letters to Julia, had teasingly written that he had been showing attentions to a school-teacher who lived near the camp.

"A good many people camp in that locality," was the evasive reply.

He halted at the door leading into the living-room. His face was white. His eyes were red. He looked as if he had had a hard spell of sickness. Anna Barton was sitting bolt upright and unsmiling on one side of the room. Gertie Green was sitting quiet and unsmiling on the opposite side of the room.

"Good morning, Perry," Anna greeted him with forced politeness.

Gertie Green did not say a word, but she looked him squarely in the eye, and it seemed to him that her eyes were repeating the words she had said the afternoon before: "Perry, I trust you. I know you want to do right."

He set his suit-case down by the side of the door and went on into the room. "Take a seat," he said to Don, pointing to a chair near Anna, while he himself went across the room to a chair that was standing near Gertie Green.

There was an embarrassing pause. Anna's face was very white. "Perry," she pleaded, "what's wrong?"

Perry cast about in his own mind to find a way to

begin, and to know what he was going to say after he did begin to talk.

Anna appealed to Don. "What's the matter, Don?"

Don merely gave a look and a nod toward Perry as if to say, "Ask him."

Gertie Green arose from her chair. "It is nearly train time," she said.

Perry reached out his hand and touched her, and motioned for her to be seated again. "You're not going on the train, Gertie. I'll take you in my auto. We'll start pretty soon."

There was no mistaking the look of relief and gladness that came over Miss Green's face as she resumed her seat; neither was there any mistaking the look of anger that was beginning to show in Anna Barton's face.

Mrs. Steele tried to relieve the embarrassment by suggesting to Perry, "If you have some business to attend to for this lady, wouldn't it be better for you to postpone it until after your wedding? You have so much to see to right at this time, you know."

Perry shook his head. "I have something to tell you," he began resolutely. "I—ah—when Don and I were camping out this spring, we—ah—made the acquaintance of two young ladies."

He shifted his position uneasily. "They were very highly respected, attractive girls."

He paused to moisten his dry, parched lips with his tongue. Presently he went on. "We were with them a good deal, and—well, we were—ah—we fell captive to their charms before we realized it."

The speaker would not allow himself to look at

Anna, lest his pity and love for her and his desire to spare her from suffering should make it too hard for him to do what he felt that he ought to do.

"Yesterday Don drove over there, and married the girl to whom he took such a liking while we were out on that camping trip."

Miss Green gasped. "What? Mary Norton?"

Don nodded his head. "Mary Rankin, now."

"Well, he got one of the dearest girls on earth," Miss Green declared.

"I know he did. Don is to be congratulated," Perry agreed with Miss Green. "She is a lovely girl, and a true Christian. Don's friends will all learn to love her, and will soon come to know that she is abundantly worthy to be welcomed into the best social circles in the town."

Don murmured his thanks for the tribute to his bride.

They waited for Perry to go on with his story, but he seemed to be at a loss to know how to proceed.

Anna Barton was sitting angry and indignant. "May I ask you a question, Perry?" she asked sternly.

"Yes."

"Is this lady here the one to whose charms you say you fell captive?"

"Yes."

"You spoke of taking her home in your auto instead of allowing her to go on the train."

"Yes."

Anna arose from the chair. She did not show any signs of fainting or going into hysterics, as Perry

had feared she would, but her eyes were blazing with anger.

"Perry Steele, this trifling has gone far enough!" she exclaimed. "You've got to choose, and choose right now! Either send this person about her own business, or I'm through with you!"

She waited a minute for Perry to answer, but he said never a word.

Gertie Green made a movement as if she were ready to rise from her chair if he gave the least indication that it was his wish for her to go, but he reached out his hand and touched her to show her that she was not to go.

Anna saw the movement. She angrily tore the engagement ring from her finger and flung it at him. "Our engagement is all off! You can take her home and stay there for all I care. I'm through with you!"

The angry girl turned and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Perry repressed the yearning to recall her and to take her in his arms and tell her that he was only joking. He saw that the turn things had taken was for the best, for it would give Anna a chance to save her pride to a certain extent by enabling her to say that she had thrown him over because he was carrying on a flirtation with another girl.

"Perry, Perry! What have you done!" Mrs. Steele reproved him. "You surely are not yourself this morning."

"Mother, it's for the best. I was intending to tell you before I start that I am going to take Miss

Green home today, and she and I are going to get married."

Mrs. Steele looked at him a minute as if she doubted the testimony of her ears.

Perry studiously avoided meeting her gaze.

She turned to study the younger woman sitting near his side. The latter met her gaze for a second, then dropped her eyes to the floor in abashed silence.

A look of disgust came over the face of the older woman. "Humph! I think I begin to see!"

Her voice showed a world of reproach and shocked surprize. She dropped weakly into a chair and covered her face with her hands. "O Perry, Perry! Is it possible that you have got into trouble and have to marry this girl!"

Perry was speechless for a minute. Then he faltered, "Mother, you—you—I didn't say that."

"No, you didn't say it, but I know it all the same. You never in the world would have gone back on Anna Barton if you hadn't got yourself into a position where you had to give her up. To think that you should fall for the wiles of an immoral girl! A temptress!"

Miss Green was already crying, and at this last remark by Mrs. Steele she slid from the chair to the floor and laid her arms on the chair and hid her face in her arms, and sobbed aloud.

"Mother, stop!" Perry sternly demanded. "You don't know what you are saying. Gertie is a good girl. It was my fault that she made a misstep—altogether my fault. She has always lived an exemplary life, and she would have kept her high place if I had kept the high place where I belong."

As he stood there gloomily looking at the others, Gertie Green down on the floor beside a chair, weeping, his mother with her head bowed in her hands, weeping, and Don standing there looking as if he wanted to weep, Perry thought of the contrast between this tragic scene—this prelude to the marriage that would take place that day—and the joyous, happy singing of the bridal chorus which his friends in the Choral Union had been rehearsing for the wedding which they all thought was going to take place in a few days.

By and by Mrs. Steele raised her head. "After all, Perry, I suppose you are doing right to marry and protect and care for this girl."

She arose from her chair and went across the room to Gertie Green. She kneeled beside the weeping girl and put both arms around her. "Neither do I condemn thee," she quoted. "Please forget the unkind way in which I spoke a minute ago. None of us have kept so free from making mistakes that we can afford to be too hard on others who make mistakes."

She drew the younger woman close to her side. "There, my daughter, don't cry."

Gertie hid her face against her comforter's shoulder.

Presently Mrs. Steele disengaged her arms and arose to her feet. "Let's sit up now, and talk about what it will be best to do," she said as she drew Gertie up by the hand. "What are your plans, Perry?"

"I am planning to take Gertie home today. We can go by the way of Carthage, and be married

there, or we can be married in her own home tonight, just as she says."

"I'd rather have the wedding take place in my own home," she said.

"And after that?"

"We'll go West, and take a new start."

"You don't know where you'll locate?"

"No, I may have to try several places before I get a job. I'll write to you and keep you informed where we are."

"Look here!" Don spoke up. "I'm thinking of inviting myself and my wife to your wedding. We can drive over there with you today, and go to Mary's home after the wedding tonight, then drive back here tomorrow. I'm sure that Mary will be glad to do that."

"And I'll go with you," Mrs. Steele said.

THE END

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